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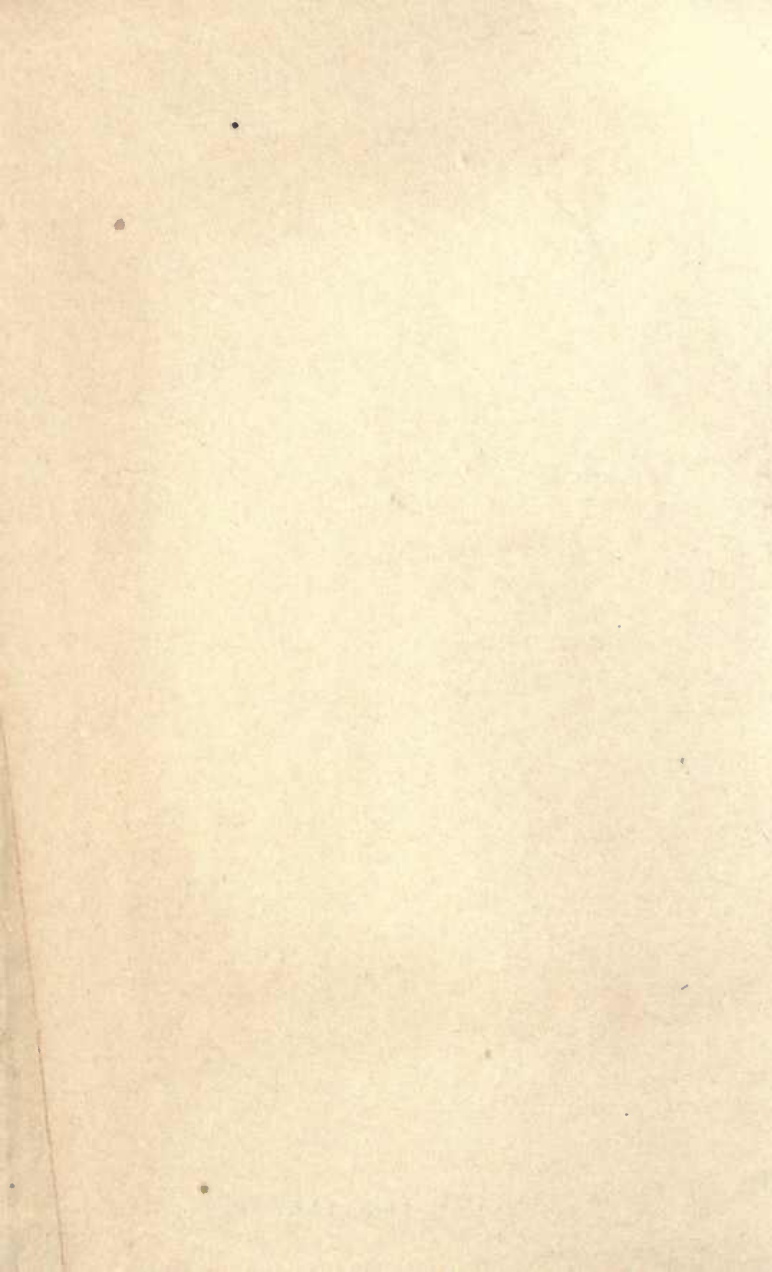
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INVISIBLE TIDES

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BY
BEATRICE KEAN SEYMOUR



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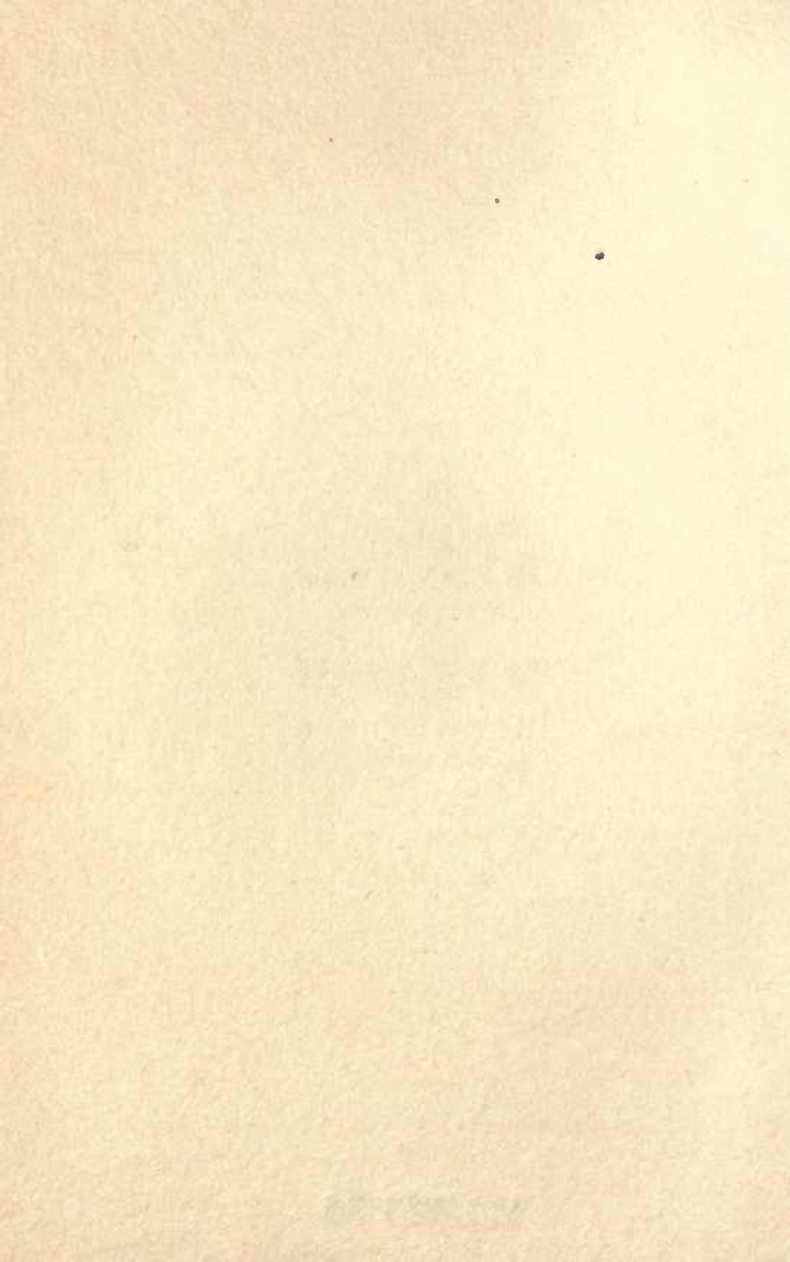
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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO
MY HUSBAND
WILLIAM KEAN SEYMOUR
IN
COMRADESHIP AND LOVE

2132774



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Impelled of invisible tides and fulfilled of unspeakable
things. *Hymn to Proserpine.*

BOOK I

DAWN

INVISIBLE TIDES

CHAPTER ONE

I

YEARS afterwards it sometimes seemed to Hilary Sargent that the first really interesting event which had occurred in his life was the receipt, soon after his seventh birthday, of the letter from his mother in America — a phenomenon none the less wonderful because its recipient was not enough of a scholar to decipher its meaning without skilled assistance. But in reality, of course, Hilary knew quite well that lots of interesting things had happened to him long before this — in that remote past which had been his fifth and sixth years of existence. Yet the memory of these things, it could not be denied, had become somewhat blurred, so that to look back at them was rather like looking at a familiar landscape through a faint mist — one could not be sure that one saw what actually existed. Here and there a tall object, like a church spire, would stand out boldly challenging recognition, but for the rest one could not help believing that the mist altered perspectives and mischievously inverted values.

Certainly two figures from out this very early period of Hilary's existence were rather like the church spire — in that they did stand out with amazing clearness. The first of these figures was that of a tall slim woman with dark hair curled about her forehead and a voice that seemed to lift the heart right out of a small boy's body. This was Hilary's mother, and with her nearly all his earliest recollections had to do. The slim, exquisitely gowned picture she had made for his childish eyes she remained for his maturer vision, and it was for her rather than for any sculptured pair of lovers on a Grecian

vase that Keats had promised eternal youth and beauty. To Hilary, his mother was for ever young, for ever fair, and long after Fate had written *finis* to the chapter of youth that Tragedy had so pitilessly blotted, there lingered with the boy the soft tones of her voice, a recollection of her smile or some pathetic ghost of a chance attitude — and these things had about them the sweetness of an old perfume and all its tenderness. They could never die or be forgotten — and yet, none the less, that chapter was smudged and blotted. . . .

The second figure that looked out of the dead years of childhood with the persistency of the church spire was nurse, who, however, did not like children even when they were “good” and refrained from asking questions. In nurse’s slovenly meaning of the word, Hilary was very seldom “good” and certainly he never failed to ask questions. To Hilary the word “nurse” came to stand for a person who said continually, “Goodness gracious me, ’ow should I know?” and became disagreeable when the day was wet.

Besides nurse there was Annie. Annie was the housemaid, young, pretty and talkative; as unfavourably disposed as nurse to the answering of questions and as resentful of the rain. Hilary found this dislike of grown-ups for rain an extremely puzzling thing, and it seemed to be the mark of them all — if he excepted his mother. Somehow, he had always to do that. Molly Sargent went with no rule that was ever made: the very thought of her converted your most accurate generalisation into something entirely ridiculous. Certainly she was never known to make rude remarks about the weather nor to grow provoked at a child’s interminable questions. And you always knew when something pleased or amused her, because she looked at you with such a merry gleam in her eyes, which would run like magic down into the corners of her mouth until, throwing back her head, she would laugh aloud so delightedly that if you were a small child there was nothing for you to do but laugh as well — even if the joke had escaped you.

Sometimes from out the misty days to which these two clearly defined figures belonged, there would arise another — less clearly to be recognised and always just a little mysterious. Him the boy addressed as “father,” and in later years found it difficult to identify him with the stern, prematurely grey and

taciturn man he came eventually to know. Out of the shadowy uncertainty of this earliest of times there arose a distinct recollection of a grave, kindly-eyed man who called his mother "Molly" and sometimes "Molly darling," and who, in a manner which must surely have been light-hearted would ask the boy if he didn't think his mother a pretty lady.

"Isn't she charming?" he would say gravely, "and don't you just love the way her hair curls?"

And Hilary always remembered that while he struggled with his admiration and incoherence his mother would begin to laugh in her delightfully unexpected fashion — as though life were the jolliest thing you could imagine and the compliments of a husband and a baby son the best things in the world.

2

There were other times, too, the memory of which it was always a wondrous joy to recapture — and they belonged, most of them, to that hour when nurse had tucked him up in bed and had gone tramping with her heavy step down the long dark staircase: and they were always heralded by a light quick footstep that Hilary knew belonged only to one person in the world. And the "only person" would come in, dressed beautifully for dinner, and sitting by the side of Hilary's cot would tell him stories of the little elves that live in foxgloves and the fairies who dance in the long grass when the moon shines brightly. Listening, Hilary would forget that nurse had said there were no fairies: his mother took them for granted, so of course there were fairies. And sometimes she would recite little poems to him — not the stupid things nurse said about Mary who had a little lamb and Jack and Jill who fell down a hill, but real poems about real children. The first time Hilary heard one of these "real" poems was at the close of a cold winter day when the night-nursery fire was banked up cheerfully and bed, beyond question, was a very comfortable place indeed. Mrs. Sargent had stood with one foot held out to the bright blaze and her small son had lain regarding her with eyes wide with approval. Yet not until many years later did Hilary realise how grateful he was to her for that dainty appearance. Molly Sargent, at least, was never guilty of

offending the fastidious gaze of a child by a slovenly or careless manner of dress.

"Comfy?" she asked, neatly poking in a too-venturesome piece of coal with a buckled shoe.

"Yes. I don't mind coming to bed when it's dark. But it's awful when the sun shines."

Still intently concerned with the daring piece of coal Molly Sargent had looked up and smiled. It was an understanding smile, full of sympathy and a rare camaraderie.

"There was a man once," she said, "who felt like that when he was a little boy, and when he grew up he remembered all about it and made a poem out of it."

"What's a poem?"

His mother left her piece of coal to look after itself and came and leant over the rail of his cot.

"That's too big a question for to-night," she said. "But a poem's a very charming thing."

"Is it?" said Hilary, "say one."

Molly Sargent "said" two and told him their names — "Bed in Summer" and "The Shadow." They left Hilary strangely thrilled. That, he discovered later, was what his mother's voice did to people. It had thrilled more people than you could count. . . .

"Is he dead — the man who wote the poems?" he wanted to know.

Somehow it was always a safe assumption — this gloomy one that people were dead. Grimm and Andersen were dead, of course. He knew that. Even nurse knew that. All the really interesting people were dead, if you came to think of it. This new man, too. He had died, so his mother told him, only a year ago. She said it sadly, almost as though he had been a personal friend of hers. And she told him his name — Robert Louis Stevenson.

"P'waps he isn't weally dead," Hilary suggested.

"I'm afraid he is, darling. He died ever so far away from England in a place called Samoa."

Luckily for Molly Sargent the glamour of the new poems overcame Hilary's desire for information regarding Samoa. He settled himself on his pillows and demanded "more."

That was the beginning, for Hilary, of his knowledge of

Stevenson. From that time the author of "Bed in Summer" became a great favourite and shared the honours with Grimm and Andersen. It was wonderful what a lot of poems and stories his mother knew, and how well she told them. Her deep vibrant voice stirred her little son so deeply that it became a pleasure merely to lie still and listen to the sound of the words: so that sometimes he missed the point of the story and it had to be repeated.

3

And once Stevenson was responsible for a tragedy.

Primarily, of course, it was nurse's fault, because she ought to have given him his hot milk in the nursery instead of there in bed. But it was certainly Stevenson's fault that he forgot all about the cup he was holding. Nobody could think of hot milk and the need to hold a cup tightly while somebody was telling you the story of *Treasure Island*, and Hilary would not have cared in the least if the milk had not spitefully chosen to run down the side of his mother's beautiful blue frock and spoil the look of it. Seeing these things he collapsed into tears.

"Silly boy," said his mother, "to cry about a frock. It doesn't matter a bit."

Hilary, however, continued to cry. Accidents of this kind were "carelessness" in the nursery — something you couldn't possibly pass over.

"Now, please," said Molly Sargent. "Why should *you* cry about it if I don't?"

"Don't you mind its being spoilt?"

"Not a bit."

"P'waps it was worn out?" Hilary suggested hopefully.

"No — but I can so easily get another, you see. And if you spoil your eyes with crying you'll have to make do with them. You can't buy eyes in the shops, you know — at least, not the sort of eyes you'd like to have."

"Will daddy give you some more money to buy a new frock with?"

"Daddy?" She smiled. "Oh, yes, of course . . ."

"Does daddy give you a *lot* of money?"

"Well, not a lot, perhaps."

"Doesn't anybody?"

"Yes. There's a nice kind man at a theatre."

"What's theatre?"

"A very interesting place. You'll see when you grow big. P'raps you'll go and work there some day, too, like mother. And the nice kind gentleman will give *you* lots of money."

"Would I have to work?"

"Hard."

"Nice work?"

"Ever so nice — the nicest ever. You wouldn't ever be able to bear doing any other afterwards. Shall I go on with the story?"

So the tragedy was forgotten and Molly Sargent sat down in her ruined frock to finish the story of *Treasure Island*.

4

But things were not always like this. . . .

In the midst of happy days there would suddenly intrude some hint of times less blissful to come. It would arise from different quarters — from nurse with her raised finger enjoining quiet, from stray scraps of conversation in the nursery, from a brief, careless recognition — far too brief and much too careless — of his existence from his father, and alas! from a tired, fretful note in his mother's voice. When she came to put the finishing touches to nurse's process of "tucking up" Hilary learned to tell at a glance when it was quite certain there would be no story.

"Mother's too tired," she would say, and go out without once looking back in her pretty fashion over her shoulder. Recalling these things across the gulf of many years Hilary had a queer sense of compassion for the small boy who had wept hot and bitter tears into the white pillow which smothered his sobs.

These were bad times, but there were worse. There were the dreadful days when the sound of loud and angry voices would travel upstairs and, with eyes wide with terror and dismay, Hilary would steal out to listen. And doors would bang and nurse would come rushing up and bundle him roughly

back into the nursery, and soon the only sound he would hear in the house would be that of his own sobs. Not for years did Hilary know what these quarrels were about, but to him they were always catastrophic, for almost invariably one thing would happen a few days later. Numerous trunks and boxes would be packed, a cab would come rumbling up, his mother (a subdued, graver mother than usual) would come in to wish him good-bye, and he would hear her driven off down the Square into the road beyond.

For Hilary in the days that followed the universe had lost its charm: somehow, things had cheapened. Across all the gladness of life a heavy veil had been flung, so that the days were rather like those winter mornings when a thick fog shut out the evergreens in the Square garden: it was hard to believe they had ever been there. Only, these days, the fog did not lift: one caught not even the faintest glimpse of the evergreens. . . .

5

But presently, when he least expected it, his mother would return, and from a sad little boy with a lump in his throat, Hilary would become the happiest child in London. For after these absences Molly Sargent would always seem to be very glad to be home again: she would come into the night-nursery with her store of tales, and into the day-nursery, where she would teach Hilary the jolliest new games, caring not a scrap that in her rôle as a lion or tiger she might tear her pretty frocks, or as the Beanstalk or Giant might bump her curly head. But suddenly there would be nurse again, enjoining quiet. His mother was busy and must not be disturbed, and whether he liked it or not he must learn to play by himself. "W'y, no other child in London's got as many toys to play with as you," she would say, more often than not provoked to the sharp shaking of a rebellious shoulder, "I'm sure I don't know what'll become of you."

Hilary didn't care. And as for the bit about the toys he had heard it far too often to be impressed by it. Moreover, he was in no mood to be chastened by the woes of other small boys. His own were far too tumultuous.

Gradually Mrs. Sargent's journeys grew more frequent,

the intervals of absence longer, and Hilary's sense of desolation deepened. For his father seemed to become more silent every day and less and less inclined to pay attention to an inquisitive little boy whose questions were obviously a source of great annoyance to grown-up people.

Yet they were kind, sometimes, and gave him information unasked. (Not his father, of course, but Annie and nurse.) There was, for instance, the surprising day when nurse had explained his mother's absences by saying she was an "hactress" (which told him nothing at all) and that she was in Americy (which told him very little more, since neither Annie nor nurse knew anything at all about Americy, save that it was a long way off and that you never went there unless you were a good child and refrained from asking questions).

There was, too, another day, more surprising still, when Annie showed him a photograph in one of the sixpenny weeklies and asked him if he knew who it was. To be perfectly candid, Hilary, at first, did not. No memory of the past jumped out at him of this woman with the floating hair, the wide scared eyes and the bunch of grasses and wild flowers caught up against her breast. Annie had laughed.

"'E doesn't know 'is own mother w'en 'e sees 'er," she had said. "'Pon my word, Master 'ilary, you *are* a one."

"But what does she look like that for?" Hilary had demanded, and it was nurse, not Annie, who explained.

"Because she's pretendin' to be Hawphelia," she told him. "And (condescendingly) Hawphelia *had* to look like that."

"Who was Hawphelia?" Hilary asked.

Oh, someone in Shakespeare—someone who had to go mad, nurse thought, and the idea of his mother having to pretend to be someone who "had to go mad" haunted Hilary for the rest of the week, when he found enough courage to show the paper containing the photograph to his father who instantly threw it angrily into the corner.

"I will not have you looking at these papers," he shouted. "Never let me see you with one again."

"All wite," said Hilary, "but who, please, was Hawphelia?"

"It's not *Hawphelia*, but *Ophelia*."

"But nurse said . . ."

"Never mind what nurse said."

“And why, please, did Miss Ophelia have to go mad?”

But instead of answering Ralph Sargent had walked over to the corner where the paper had fallen and picked it up. Smoothing out the sheet he stood for a few seconds gazing at the photograph; and presently he said a strange thing.

“Ophelia ought to be fair and not dark.” Then he tore out the photograph and put it into his pocket.

The boy added this strange item to the information he had acquired from nurse, for nothing else, apparently, was forthcoming from this new quarter. For years afterwards Ophelia, to Hilary, was just “someone in Shakespeare who had to go mad and who ought to be fair.”

CHAPTER TWO

1

IN the matter of stories some children have all the luck. . . . Little Helena Morden had none at all. She would have loved those poems and stories Molly Sargent told to Hilary, but Mrs. Morden knew nothing at all of Stevenson, and if it had been otherwise it is extremely doubtful if she would have passed on her knowledge to Helena. For to begin with, Agatha Morden was not that "sort" of woman, and unlike Hilary, Helena was not an only child. Helena had two brothers and two sisters, and even Molly Sargent would have admitted that the difference between one child and five is, for all practical purposes, unbridgable. Besides, Mrs. Morden had not wanted any children at all, though she had wanted to get married. At twenty-one she had accepted Arthur Morden because he was the first person who had asked her, and because she could never quite forget that she had five other sisters, four of them her senior and all of them unmarried. No other fact could have made her overlook the obvious drawbacks of Arthur Morden's position (he was the Manager of the Wandsworth branch of a big London bank) and of his salary, which was two hundred and fifty a year. But these were facts which her father and mother saw with uncompromising clearness, and it took Agatha a couple of years to overcome their objections to so poor an alliance. But she had the ultimate satisfaction of reading a column and a half about herself in the local paper and of wearing white satin and orange-blossoms, after which she retired to a ridiculously small house off the Wandsworth High Street and wondered if "this" was romance. Two years of married life brought her little beyond several financial crises and two children — a girl and a boy. The children she accepted philosophically, as one of the penalties and inconveniences of marriage, so that a legend grew up in the

Burke family that "dear Agatha was such a splendid mother." The financial crises were much less amenable to philosophy, and after a time Agatha ceased her struggle to prevent romance from flying out of the window. It was absurd to expect romance on their ridiculous salary, when there was a position to keep up and two children to provide for. Romance, sizing up the situation, sought for itself a more promising abode and Agatha was left with her babies and money-troubles.

When romance had flown to so remote a spot that, as far as the Mordens were concerned, it was for all time out of earshot, Arthur fell suddenly ill — and the situation was saved. For medical opinion having agreed that Agatha's husband must live in the country, the Burke influence exerted itself to the extent of finding him a post in the bank at Rattenby, in the West Riding of Yorkshire, and here, with their two children and household effects, the Mordens moved, and here, ten months later, Helena, not rapturously welcomed, made her entrance into the world.

Whilst Helena was still a baby in arms, Walter was born, and before he could run, came Lucy, whom Providence luckily decided should be the "baby" of the family. Five children in seven years were more than even Agatha's philosophy could endure; had there been any more she would have grown resentful. These things went by luck, she reflected, for though her mother had married at twenty-one and had a large family, she was twenty-six when her first child was born. Five years of freedom! How bitterly, at times, Agatha, the "splendid mother," begrudged them to her! And then, to make the "luck" more pronounced, grandmamma Burke had married money. . . .

2

Out there on the breezy moors, however, the five little Mordens grew strong and healthy; life made less demands upon their mother here than in London, and Arthur's health grew slowly normal. Life, which had begun to smile again, broke into a positive guffaw when the death of Agatha's father enriched the Morden exchequer to the extent of eighty pounds a year. Agatha, heart-broken, went up to town for the funeral, but she wore a new frock for the first time in two years, and

during the ceremony in the parish church at Putney, tried hard not to let her thoughts dwell too fervently upon the will that was to be read when they returned to the house. But with five small children it was enormously difficult not to think of these things.

Helena was barely six when the big house at Putney was given up and grandmamma Burke, in widow's weeds, came to make her home at Rattenby-on-the-Moors. Of course there were Agatha's unmarried sisters to provide for and a whole host of small grandchildren, but grandmamma Burke, none the less, was a splendid investment and neither Arthur nor Agatha proposed to dispute her tyrannous sway over their household. Besides, Agatha was devoted to her mother. . . .

3

Gradually, as Helena grew up, there came to be a consensus of opinion that she was a "difficult" child. It was her mother who said of her at the age of ten that she had no "natural feeling," a statement based chiefly, it must be confessed, upon her refusal to weep over grandmamma Burke's death and upon her rebellious attitude towards the wearing of decent mourning. ("I hate black," Helena said, "it makes me feel dismal!" As though one should not be dismal, or at least *look* dismal, when a member of one's family had recently died!)

But Helena's recollection of her grandmother was of a distinctly tiresome old lady who wore spotless caps threaded with mauve ribbon, and who said repeatedly to Helena's mother, "Agatha, can't you really keep the children quieter? I'm sure when you were all little you weren't allowed to make so much noise." Helena, looking at her grandmother out of those big, frank eyes of hers, used to suppose it was all too long ago for her to remember anything very definite about it, for, to Helena, grandmamma Burke was a very old lady indeed. (Poor soul, she was only seventy-two when she died, though she did look more.) Perhaps it was because it was upon Helena that this unreasonable request for quietude pressed most harshly; invariably it was she upon whom Agatha, fussily maternal, urged the necessity for less noisy games. That it was mainly Helena who invented them affected the question in

nowise. One had to play at something, and of course everybody knew (save grandmamma Burke) that all the really good games were frightfully noisy!

In one way and another Helena spent much deep speculation upon the subject of grandmamma Burke — or, rather, upon the subject of old age as exemplified in that lady. It must be, she would think, a very dreadful thing to get old — as old as that. She used to wonder what it felt like to want to sit all day by the fireside, distressed by the slightest noise and inconvenienced by hands which trembled so much that at dinner you sometimes dropped your knife and fork three or four times during the meal. Grandmamma Burke — so Helena's mother told her — had, in her day, been a beauty, and before her eighteenth birthday three gentlemen had asked permission to marry her. It used to amaze Helena that it should have been necessary to ask permission, for Helena's only idea of maturity was the freedom to do exactly as one liked just whenever one liked. But success, according to the maternal recital, had not waited upon any one of the intrepid three — and it was quite another whom grandmamma Burke at twenty-one had been permitted to marry, and she had been taken, a very lovely bride, to a big house in Putney, in those far-off days when Putney had meant decent seclusion and the heath at the top of the hill. . . . Critically regarding her grandmother, Helena would piously hope that her mother was telling the truth; for of the alleged beauty the child, now, could see not a trace. Grandmamma Burke was become only a shrivelled, wrinkled old lady, with a wig and no teeth — save those which glared so horridly at you from the tumbler on the dressing-table when you went in to say "Good morning." And the wrinkles, Helena had heard cook say (who knew all about these things) were only due to the powder and "cosmics" grandmamma Burke had used when she was engaged in being a beauty.

However, "cosmics" or no "cosmics," one night grandmamma Burke took it into her head to die — quite decently, in her bed, and everyone (save Helena) wept as though they were heart-broken. Helena was enormously puzzled by this unexpected and overwhelming display of grief. She was far too deeply interested to have time or desire for tears, and, in

any case, she had not loved grandmamma Burke and was fairly certain that grandmamma Burke had not loved her. And small wonder, for after all, even if one is hairless and toothless, and well on the way towards the seventy-third milestone of life, it is not altogether pleasant to be reminded that one has at least one foot firmly planted in the grave, nor exactly exhilarating to be requested to answer embarrassing questions concerning that dark backward and abysm of time when one was young and didn't object to noise! Helena felt vaguely that she was a tactless child and did not blame grandmamma Burke in the very least for not loving her, but she couldn't pretend to be sorry she was dead. She was only enormously relieved that she would no longer have to rack her brains to think of quiet games, nor watch that terrific tragicomic struggle with a knife and fork. . . .

When grandmamma Burke's will was read it was found that she had left Helena's brothers and sisters an annuity, upon their coming of age, of fifty pounds each. Helena had been left out. . . .

"I don't care," she said loftily, answering one of the prospective capitalists, not over-generous references to her wretchedly penniless condition, "I don't want her money. When I grow up I shall marry someone who has plenty and go to live in a palace. I didn't love grandmamma Burke a bit. Neither did you, only you're all too sneaky to say so. But I'm *glad* she's dead, and I hope she won't go to heaven, so there!"

Nevertheless, mutinously regarding the four bloated capitalists who were her brothers and sisters, Helena reflected that, after all, perhaps she had repeated that phrase of cook's about the one foot in the grave a bit too often. For, supposing she *didn't* marry someone with plenty of money and go to live in a palace? Money was a very serious business. You couldn't really get on in life without it. Helena was quite sure of these things, for she had heard her mother say so repeatedly.

4

She said it again that evening after the reading of grandmamma Burke's will. Secretly, Agatha thought that cutting out of Helena was unnecessarily spiteful of her mother, though

nothing would have induced her to say so. As she stood there brushing out her long dark hair, touched only here and there as yet with grey, Agatha's outlook upon Helena's future was a gloomy one.

"Oh, lord," growled the man in the big, brass bed — the bed Helena always used to think it must need a ladder to climb into — "What a time you are! What's the good of worrying? Ten to one she'll find somebody to marry her. The Mordens are a good-looking lot, as that Ellingham woman said the other day. . . . Do hurry up and put out the light."

He had forgotten the time when he had loved to watch Agatha as she stood combing out the long dark strands of her hair. Both of them had forgotten a great number of things besides that. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

1

HILARY'S mother never came back from America. That one letter came for him on his seventh birthday and no message ever again. He forgot, presently, to look for any, and grew tired eventually of asking the questions no one was ever prepared to answer. They let him think between them that his mother was dead. The servants may have known better (servants always do), and in any case they had, as they would have told you, their "instructions."

Life, in its way of course, went on being interesting. A tall, angular woman came to the big house in the Square for two hours each morning to teach Hilary, as nurse said, "his letters and not before it was time, too." Miss Atwell was kind and on the whole good-humoured, but Hilary disliked the way her front teeth grew and the manner in which she drew back her dark brown hair. Two other faults Hilary found with her: the first that she regarded his passion for interrogation with scarcely less disfavour than nurse and Annie; and the second that she knew very little about the man called Stevenson and did not seem to share Hilary's opinion of the wonderful things he had written.

Then suddenly the centre of life shifted to Sussex and an old rambling house with long windows from which you could step straight out into the garden. This old house had a garden which shamed the London Square into extinction, and at the bottom of it grew a long line of poplars that sang all day and all night in the breeze — a song that was like summer rain on dry leaves. Here in the country he might keep a cat and dog, though nurse disliked both tremendously, but especially Flossie, the cat — a "narsty 'orrid creature she couldn't abide the feel of." A ridiculous statement, this, to Hilary, who loved noth-

ing better than to rub his face against Flossie's soft black fur or to feel the warmth of her body working insidiously through his knickerbockers.

The country revealed several new traits in nurse's character. There were so many things that lived which she disliked. Frogs and toads (of which she told dreadful tales) and moths of every description. These latter (poor, unhappy creatures!) she would pursue around the ceiling at night with any article of clothing which happened to come first to hand, whilst Hilary watched with big eyes full of a horrible fear that they would hurt themselves against the candle-flame and fall to the ground with their delicate wings scorched and maimed — a consideration, however, which did not seem to disturb nurse in the least.

In the place of Miss Atwell (who had preferred London to Sussex and to whom Hilary had consequently had to say good-bye) a girl with a bright face and dancing brown eyes came regularly each morning from the village to deal with this business of lessons. Ursula Yeomans did not resuscitate the bead and wool-mat industries beloved of Miss Atwell, of London, and (what was far better) she knew and loved all those things of the man called Stevenson. She taught him, too, the names of birds and trees and of wild flowers; and disposed of nurse's wild flights of fancy regarding frogs and toads, both of which turned out to be quite nice creatures that (if you wished and when they were tiny) you might keep in a bath. Ursula Yeomans, too, it was, who discovered to Hilary the interesting fact that butterflies had names and appeared at different seasons, so that it became a matter of delirious excitement to find a May butterfly out in June. Hilary's ideas of capture, however, never matured, because Miss Yeomans considered it cruel. ("Such a tiny life, Hilary. Don't you think they're entitled to every bit of it?" And Hilary did.) So he learned to stalk his butterfly and study it at short distances, and grew to be terribly scornful of other small boys who rushed wildly about with nets.

This new free life in the country had grown to be most tremendously interesting when Aunt Lavinia came and spoiled it.

Lavinia Sargent was a narrow woman — the outcome of a narrow creed — whose life was controlled by two passions, the one for her brother, the other for her God. Not that Lavinia would have admitted that they were “passions” at all (you would not find the word in her vocabulary) nor that they should be put in that order. Other people might have entertained doubts as to their eternal salvation, but not so Lavinia Sargent. She knew the day and hour when she had “crossed the line,” when for ever she had separated herself from the ungodly and stepped out boldly along the narrow path which led, she was assured, to heaven — a dull place, it is true, as Lavinia pictured it. But she would not mind the dullness: all her life beauty and happiness had been suspect, and if she could she would have swept the whole world of art into oblivion. Cromwell was for her the saviour of England: a vile print of him hung in her room where each morning he saluted the new day with a heavy scowl of disapproval. Darwin, Huxley, Spencer and the German philosophers were all blasphemers against the Truth — to Lavinia, just men “who thought they knew better than Genesis.” To have tea with Lavinia Sargent was invariably to be put in one of these two groups: there was no possibility of escape and no appeal. If you were a person of sense you saw that at once, for there was literally nothing to argue about; you were either fit to be mentioned in the same breath as Cromwell or you were not. Generally, of course, you were not.

It took no more than two minutes for Lavinia to consign Mary Hilary (who became Mary Sargent, and Hilary’s mother) to her proper group, for Mary detested Cromwell and in her innocence she said so directly her eyes fell upon the vile print of him in Lavinia’s bedroom.

“Oh, you have that awful picture,” she had remarked cheerily, “I always think it was so morbid of him to insist on the painter including the wart. ‘Wart and all’ was the famous phrase, wasn’t it?”

“Cromwell,” Lavinia had informed her, “was as his Creator made him.”

And Mary had said, “Oh, I know, poor creature, the *wart*

wasn't his fault." Then she had laughed and the merry gleam had danced madly in her grey eyes, and Lavinia, very dignified, had led the way downstairs.

But because life was so full of a number of things Mary had thought no more of the incident. She was sorry for Lavinia, because she must find life so dull; and she was rather sorry, too, for Ralph, because she supposed it could not be pleasant for him to have such an impossible sister. But she resolutely refused to see in that unsuccessful visit any omen for the future. Which was just as well, since she was in love with Ralph Sargent and he with her, and they intended, Lavinia notwithstanding, to marry each other.

But from that day Lavinia bitterly opposed this preposterous friendship of her brother's with Mary Hilary, the actress, using arguments that to her were unanswerable. Later, when the engagement she could not prevent was announced, she wore upon her face the expression of a martyr, which, however, did not prevent her from hating Mary Hilary. "Once an actress, always an actress," she said when the marriage took place, and she went on saying it at various intervals ever afterwards. But at first it really did look as though she were wrong, because Ralph and Mary were so obviously happy. Ralph thought his sister and her precious phrase ridiculous: for a woman in love is—just a woman in love. At heart when you get right down to fundamentals all women are the same. He said (and thought) that of Mary Hilary, whom the world had called a genius, and half-truth as it was it did for some time look surprisingly like a complete one. Hilary was born after eleven months' glorious happiness, seven of which had been spent in France and Italy, out of reach of Lavinia and her angles (alike of religion and personality) which Mary found later could hurt you so abominably if you happened to encounter them. And Mary did. . . .

"Once an actress, always an actress," Lavinia said, when a charity performance lured Mary back to the stage as *Beatrice*. She said it six months later when Mary had gone back to the stage for good, when her name, flaring out from boardings and 'buses, offended her eyesight. And when Ralph Sargent grew tired of the phrase she found other ways of saying the same thing. At least she would be heard.

But Ralph Sargent knew, without his sister's reminders, that this was the beginning of the end. Nothing was ever going to be the same again. For the first time in his life he hated the theatre: the thought of it, with its critical, appraising eyes, was a perpetual thorn in the flesh. His work (which was scientific, and appallingly dull to Mary, to whom he *would* talk about it!) began to suffer: his temper took on an edge. Lavinia prayed for him with fervour and her martyred expression daily deepened. For Mary, the return to the old loved life meant hours of study and long rehearsals. Molly at her work was temperamental: if a part went wrong she was nervy and *distract*; she came back from the theatre tired and just a little irritable, and she missed the accustomed ministrations of the old servants who, in the days that were past, had always waited up for her and who, somehow, had never seemed tired — superhuman, sleepless beings who made her comfortable with cushions and brought her delicious things to drink. But the big house in the Square was icy in its reception of her; her suppers were cold, dismal affairs — horrible anti-climaxes. Presently she took to having supper out — one of a gay choice little party of folk who with laughing lips blew lightly at the foam on the cup of life and sipped at it happily. But the next morning there would be Ralph's grave face (and Lavinia's martyred one) silently rebuking her, and she knew that she had encountered the anti-climax after all. It might be dodged, but it was not to be escaped; it was always waiting for her just round the corner. It always would be waiting for her, and all the artist in Mary rose in rebellion against its importunity. Nevertheless, she made praiseworthy efforts and to please Ralph would have intervals of "rest," when feverishly they would endeavour to get back to their old footing, only to become dreadfully aware that the thing was impossible.

The thought of Hilary steadied the woman, at least. Sunning herself in his ready adoration, delighting in his eternal appreciation, she would almost believe that she could bear to turn her back for ever upon the work she loved — would imagine she could recapture the wonder and glory of those first two years of married happiness. But they had slipped

so far behind, and in front of her now stretched always the blue-misted savannahs of fame and ambition, filling her with a nostalgia that threatened to overwhelm completely every other feeling.

Lavinia was right. "Once an actress, always an actress." And yet, all the time there was the thought of the child dragging her back.

Presently the inevitable happened. They began to quarrel. Even Hilary could not prevent that. Dreadful quarrels they were—the quarrels of people with passionate natures and intense emotions. Molly was horrified at the things she said, and she, to Ralph, was "theatrical," a woman who "made scenes." Both alike were aghast at the new, strange vista opening up before them—and neither had the strength to turn in the opposite direction. They dragged each other along the fresh paths, blind with passion and emotion, and knew that nothing and no one could save them. Their very love for each other (struggling, miserable, at its last gasp) was but an additional obstacle in the way; it was too intense, too feverish; and it entirely prevented either of them from getting a clear view of their path or destination.

The end came with Molly's American tour and the renewal of a friendship she had snapped with determination when she first met Ralph Sargent. Her original contract finished, Mary signed another and wrote home when she was irretrievably committed to several months' further stay in America. Ralph Sargent knew all about that old interrupted friendship, and knew, too, that it was with this man she was playing in America, so that when the bomb fell he was not altogether unprepared for it. Molly's letter was unequivocal. It begged quite frankly for freedom and it gave just as frankly, the reasons why Ralph should take steps to procure it for her.

And Ralph would not. He would do anything but that. He would have taken her back if she would come. But she would not. She had left him because he had made life (as she understood life) unendurable for her, or they, perhaps, had made life unendurable for each other. In either case the result was precisely the same. Yet if Molly would not belong to him, at least she should not, lawfully, belong to any other

man. His mind shut fast on that thought: it never escaped him.

What correspondence there was took place between two firms of solicitors. It was business-like, impersonal and concerned not in the very least with love and the things of love. But it had the merit of brevity. It was soon over — and after that, silence. Mary neither implored nor reproached, and there were days when Ralph would have given much if she had.

Yet it was astonishing how difficult it was to forget her — that radiant creature he was not able to keep, and often he came near to hating the things which reminded him of her, for in his own pitiful fashion he loved her still and knew that he would go on loving her until life ran out, and beyond. But he would never forgive her. That was what made it pitiful — he could love but he could not forgive.

And Hilary, because he belonged to that great army of memories, was speedily turned over to other hands — the responsibilities attaching to that small person relegated with the rest of the duties of life. Beyond an assurance that the child was well and in capable hands he desired to know nothing whatever about him. Briefly and unsuccessfully Ralph Sargent had emerged into parenthood; at no time had the experiment been wholly a success, and now the episode had merely to be forgotten. From this point he turned his back upon the world, becoming more than ever absorbed in his books and his work, conscious that life, somehow, had to be got through as if Molly and he had never met — as if Love, infinitely tender-eyed, had never halted for them upon the dusty highroad of the world. It was difficult, of course. It would always be difficult, for there was Hilary, and after all, in Lavinia's homely phrase, a child isn't exactly a bale of goods. The remark was not entirely a helpful contribution towards the solution of the problem, but Lavinia was right, all the same.

For Hilary, certainly, was not going to make things easier.

3

Two years later Mary Hilary was found drowned in an ornamental pond in the grounds of an American hotel. The med-

ical evidence showed that she was expecting a child. The jury, however, were kind and brought in a verdict of "Found drowned," which hurt nobody's feelings. Because, when it happened, Hilary was not old enough to look at the papers.

CHAPTER FOUR

1

DESPITE the insistence of the maternal legend, it was a strange isolation of soul in which Helena Morden grew up. Somehow, she was always "odd woman out." Between her and her brothers and sisters there could hardly have been a more decided cleavage. If Agatha was to be believed, she was "no Burke" and "no Morden," and it was, of course, an impertinence on your part that you should not belong to one side or the other of your family. Agatha liked ordinary normal children because novelty was disturbing and she did not care to be asked awkward questions. There was much sound sense, all those years ago, behind that desire of hers for marriage without children. She did not know and never had known what to do with the individuality of a child; she did not think children should be "individuals." Children should do what they were told: they were to be seen and not heard. But Helena showed at no time any great liking for the rôle of audience and Agatha wished continually that she was "more like Gertrude," because you always knew "where you were" with Gertrude, and that was such a blessing. Gertrude was a large, broad-faced girl, phlegmatic alike in appearance and in temperament, careful of the conventions (even as a child) and concerned for other people's regard; accepting things, not so much as they are, but as they seemed to be — which was less exhausting, of course. It was Gertrude who said scornfully, "Why, what other colour should it be, stupid?" when Helena had said, "Isn't it *lovely* the grass should be green?" A world of red grass to Gertrude was unthinkable (because grass *wasn't* red), whilst to Helena it was a horror the world had most marvellously escaped. Things like this yawned continually between Gertrude and Helena, whilst between Helena and Lucy there was always a good deal

more than the three years which divided them in age. Lucy (the phrase much later was Helena's own) was a neat and tidy child with a neat and tidy mind. Lucy was the beauty of the family and probably there never was a time when she was not aware of her "points," since they were continually discussed in her presence, and grandmamma Burke, when she was alive, had Lucy for favourite, and would have you believe that she was an exact reproduction of herself at a similar age. "Yes, and if you don't look out you'll be just like grandmamma is now. You see!" Helena would gibe at her. Helena used to think it was a good job God had made Lucy so pretty because He had made her stupid. People who like the one might not really mind about the other.

If the truth were told, Helena was happier in her brothers' company than in that of either of her sisters, until she began to notice that they spent much time in pulling the wings off flies and in pinning moths and butterflies between the pages of scrap-books, which things they called "having a hobby." When Helena remonstrated with them and said it was cruel, they showed her that as she was a girl she couldn't possibly know anything about it: all boys knew that flies and moths didn't feel things. They thought Helena a mug because when she saw them doing unutterable things with moths and flies her face would go white and tears would well up slowly into her big blue eyes. At such moments all boys were hateful to her; the very word a synonym for cruelty.

There was, too, a dreadful day when she had gone with her mother and brothers into a little tea-shop in Rattenby town, where the walls disported cases of moths of every description, all pinned up dead and helpless behind the glass, moths of varied sizes and colours, over which Ted and Walter gloated and argued. Helena, turning her eyes from the sickening sight, found nothing to look at but the equally horrid sight of bright-plumaged birds, stuffed and stiff, all gazing out unseeingly upon that dingy little tea-room — all those glorious, beautiful things that had loved freedom and the sweet summer air. And Agatha had been angry because Helena would not eat her tea.

"It really is perfectly ridiculous, Arthur," she said later to Helena's father. "Such a fuss over a few birds and things,

and I don't believe she shed one tear when grandmamma Burke died. And the trouble to get her to wear her black frock!"

In Agatha's mind these two incidents came to be ranged very carefully side by side, and to them, from time to time, many others quite similar were added. Affection or consideration for animals and birds went for nothing beside a constitutional inability to bewail the death of one's grandparents, and gradually there sprang into existence the legend that Helena was "heartless," devoid of all "ordinary feeling." It was a legend that had in it neither more nor less of truth than the average legend. But it was about this time that there was born in Helena the first overwhelming realisation of the astounding indifference of perfectly good people towards the suffering of animals.

2

But always, for Helena, there was one fact for which she could never be sufficiently grateful — and that was the natural beauty of her home. Four Cross House stood high up on the edge of the moors of the West Riding of Yorkshire — an old, rambling, inconvenient house, buffeted by wind and rain and kissed in summer-time by the rays of the sun which deepened the purple of the heather and ripened the rowan berries. From her bedroom window Helena could look right across the moor, as it lay stretched out for mile upon mile, boundless and primordial — a natural element that for centuries had resisted the efforts of mankind to subjugate it. Very little, she knew, would grow on Rattenby moor. People said of it that it was "irreclaimable." You found no startling patches of wheat, corn or oats springing up here and there among the purple and green. The heather sprawled across it and the verdant leaf of the bilberry bush. For the rest there was the sun, an "everlasting wash of air," and that sense of freedom and exhilaration that she thought could not be found anywhere else at all. Nothing of the great universe did the child know beyond the little village at her feet and the neighbouring town of Rattenby. The crowded, bustling, busy mills of the great adjacent cities did not disturb her peace: she heard them spoken of as vaguely as one spoke of Timbuctoo — and her idea of the one was no less shadowy than of the other. For years Helena's world was

just that wind-swept, sun-kissed moor — black and gaunt in winter, green with the bilberry leaf and purple with heather when summer had come. And so much did these things come to mean to her that for years she imagined she could not possibly live without them.

3

Of all Agatha Morden's children Helena was by far the aptest pupil. Gertrude learned, if not with actual difficulty, at least without enthusiasm, whilst Lucy was frequently reduced to tears even at so early a stage as the multiplication table, and as long as she lived was never quite certain whether seven nines were fifty-six or sixty-three. Ted and Walter were infinitely more interested in their questionable "hobby" and their sports than in the business of study, but since they were boys and would "have to have a profession," a certain amount of gentle paternal persuasion was found an excellent corrective to their natural instinct for laziness. As to the girls, marriage was the one profession which, in Agatha's opinion, they could honourably follow. To Agatha the very word "spinster" was absurd, and she was determined that it should be used to describe her daughters once and once only — upon that proud occasion when she sat in church and heard it for the first and last time. "Gertrude Alicia Morden, spinster, of this parish," "Helena Burke Morden, spinster, of this parish," "Lucy Adelaide Morden, spinster, of this parish." To Agatha it was so extremely gratifying she could almost wish she had half a dozen daughters. She would be very fond of them and proud, seeing them grown up and suitably married. It was their youth she found so trying.

Something she found, too, that was rather uncanny about Helena's passion for learning. Of her only among the young Mordens was it in any sense true to say that she loved her books. She learned with ease and had an exceptionally retentive memory. Her English mistress wrote on her reports (somewhat to Agatha's amusement, because what did it matter?) that she knew her Scott, and sent home an essay she had written, which began, "In these days of cheap and rapid transit. . . ." It wasn't all like that, but it was undoubtedly the

opening which made Miss Denton write at the bottom of the essay, "I am sure you will agree that for so young a child, Helena's vocabulary is certainly remarkable." Agatha supposed it was, but, once again, what did it matter, so long as she could speak correctly?

Stories and poems had for Helena a terrible fascination; the people in them took a firm hold upon her imagination. They trod the moors with her, became as intimate acquaintances. She would stride along to school to the accompaniment of Glassford Bell's "Queen Mary" or some poem of Scott's, beating out the iambs with such maddening precision that her unliterary brethren would tell her to "cheese it" or to "dry up for Heaven's sake!" She found it, however, less a matter of congratulation than of sorrow that she alone of all the Mordens should have any appreciation of the beauties of English literature.

4

Helena grew up with a rapidity that surprised (and doubtless gratified) her parents. She was a "fine-looking girl," they told one another: it was a pity she was so "queer," so different from the rest. (That most of all — that she was "different.") But they raised no objection to her sitting for matriculation, and were proud of her when she took a first-class. After that, however, they exhibited no sort of interest in her studies and turned a deaf ear to the suggestion that she should go on to college and specialise in her beloved English. So because there was no help for it, Helena at seventeen came home from school to take "her proper place in the house," as Gertrude had done. In the course of time she would doubtless marry — as so far, however, Gertrude had not done. Visitors to Four Cross House might have wondered how this consummation was to be brought about — who, just precisely, there were for the Morden girls to marry. Their immediate neighbours were childless; the Ellinghams, who kept the low white house at the foot of the hill, had a large family of girls, one of whom, as Gertrude's friend, came frequently to Four Cross House to tea and bemoaned the disadvantage of being "one of seven and no boys." Besides the Ellinghams there were the Brown-Fos-

ters, whose only son was already married and settled in London, the Evertons, whose two boys were still at school, and the curate, who before coming to Rattenby had taken the liberty of choosing a wife elsewhere. Looked at how you would the matrimonial chances of Rattenby seemed despairingly remote. But Agatha would have been ready for you, conceding the impossibility of Rattenby with the blandest air in the world. For it was not on Rattenby that Agatha staked her hopes, but on Putney, where lived her youngest sister, Milly, most desirably and conveniently married to a man who could afford to maintain her as became a Burke residing within the zone of the Burke traditions. With the generosity that comes so readily to the easy-going woman to whom the lines have fallen in pleasant places, Milly Meynell was willing to lend a helping hand in this matter of husband-hunting, not unaware perhaps that the service would cost her nothing at all in the way of personal sacrifice. And so it came about, six months before Helena left school, that Gertrude, a big box of clothes and the fervent hopes of her mother, travelled together up to London and down again to Putney. Of course no one was sufficiently ill-bred to mention "marriage," but assuredly neither Gertrude nor Agatha thought of anything else. Gertrude was her mother's daughter: she, too, would not like to have to remain a spinster. . . .

And at Four Cross House Helena was bored. There was not even enough housework to go round, even if it had been any part of Agatha's scheme to have her daughters do a share of the work she paid others to do. And it was not: nothing annoyed her more than to find Helena in the kitchen, making cakes or pastry, though Helena did both extremely well and usually (as Emily Brontë made the bread) with a book propped up before her. Paying calls with her mother, being polite to visitors, struggling with small talk, Sydney Smith, Tito Mattei and Mendelssohn in the drawing-room, seemed to Helena just so many absolutely ridiculous things to do with life. She fell back upon her long moorland walks, scoured the country in all weathers and a mackintosh; and when she was at home retired into her own little world of books where Agatha, worried and mystified, could never follow her. The books she deplored until one day she came across a little volume of Ten-

nyson lying face downwards on a chair in Helena's room, with a heavily pencilled mark against that passage where Elaine meets Lancelot.

. . . she lifted up her eyes
And loved him with that love which was her doom.

It was the pencilled mark, not the poetry, which brought a smile to Agatha's mouth, for the thought came to her that it was superfluous to despair utterly (and matrimonially) of a girl who read "this sort of thing."

5

It was in the June following Helena's eighteenth birthday that Gertrude became engaged to Edgar Holmes, the junior partner in the old-established firm of Holmes, Halding and Holmes, solicitors, of Lincoln's Inn Fields, and an apparently entirely eligible young man in every way. Gertrude wrote from Putney that she hoped her dear father and mother would approve and would not object to their being married almost immediately. Her dear father and mother did approve — were, in fact, delighted, and Agatha spent an hour that morning in covering several sheets with sentiments more or less to that effect. (Left to herself, Agatha was inclined to write what is called a "rambling" letter.)

But Helena had very little to say. She was wondering what it was like to fall in love, and this engagement of Gertrude's translated at once the romance of her world of books into the world of reality, so that it both excited and thrilled her. Later, however, when the eligible Edgar spent a week-end at Four Cross House, she was less sure of things. Her prospective brother-in-law was revealed as a darkly handsome young man of twenty-eight, tall of figure, smooth of hair and skin, bold of eye — and of touch (at least, when he passed you anything at table or encountered you at the dark turn of the stairs). Moreover, there was an evening when Gertrude and he quarrelled, and when seeing Helena emerge from the house Edgar had deliberately walked over to her, forsaking the angry Gertrude, who had raged at Helena afterwards and said horrible things.

The wedding took place at the end of September, and Edgar and Gertrude went to live in a villa at Wimbledon. And when Aunt Milly (who had come to Rattenby for the ceremony) went back to Putney she took Helena with her. There she remained for a year and nothing happened save that she learned to take an interest in her appearance and discovered that her hair had a broad, natural wave in it, and that her eyes were so deep a shade of blue that at certain times and in artificial light they appeared to be black. In addition she learned from Gertrude that marriage had its drawbacks — that it was rather like living on the side of a volcano: you were lucky if you escaped. Gertrude, apparently, had not “escaped.” She was expecting a baby in October. “Such a nuisance,” she said, “all my plans dished. Edgar’s quite cross about it. I do hope I’m not going to take after mother. Five of us in six years! Just fancy! Aunt Milly told me how cross mother was about it, and they were so wretchedly poor then, too.”

Aunt Milly also it was who explained the incomprehensible failure at Putney of Agatha’s second daughter.

“She simply hasn’t any idea, my dear Agatha, how to make herself attractive to people. She ignored every eligible young man I asked to meet her, and the only person she seemed to care anything about was that man Harry will bring here — Petersen, old enough to be her father. And all *he* cares for is books. Helena and he used to talk for hours about them, as far as I can make out. Harry tells me Petersen once wrote a book himself about the poet Shelley — I think it was Shelley — he was the man whose wife (or one of them) drowned herself in the Serpentine, wasn’t he? I believe he once took her to the National Gallery. . . . Oh, have I said something funny? I had to speak very severely to Harry about it. Because Petersen’s fifty if he’s a day. Of course, my dear, I’m quite willing to have her up here again if you like, but I really don’t believe it’ll be a scrap of good. If you ask me, she isn’t the marrying sort.”

But Agatha, clinging still to her recollection of the pencilled Tennyson, refused to relinquish hope. Of course, people who read poetry and marked it *were* the “marrying sort,” even if a shade too exacting.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

HOWEVER you looked at it, Hilary thought, Aunt Lavinia's coming was a mistake. For she brought with her no knowledge whatever of the man called Stevenson, but only a lot of new rules that complicated life most dreadfully and a horrible thing called "The Sabbath." (Aunt Lavinia called it "The Seventh Day," though that didn't make it any better.)

And with the Sabbath (if it was fine) came chapel. If it was wet an awful picture-book, which alarmed Hilary considerably until he developed sufficient strength of mind to ignore it. The only thing that mattered was that when Aunt Lavinia inquired if you had been looking at the beautiful pictures like a good boy you should say that you had, ignoring the implied compliment, of course, and not contradicting her about the word "beautiful." But chapel was a much more difficult thing to dodge — or to forget, because it opened up vistas of new and distressingly difficult thought and brought strange words into his vocabulary, like "salvation" and "condemnation" and the "unforgivable sin." (Hilary did not know what that was, but was quite sure he had committed it.) The Rev. Jabez Ham expounded the gospel with the same extraordinary vehemence as that with which nurse chased the moths around the ceiling, and sometimes Hilary used to think he would never stop. But he always did, and no one ever seemed any the worse. His aunt would shake hands, then, with the people she knew and make trivial comments about the weather, with which, usually, they all had some fault to find. One took comfort from that familiar, everyday scene. You could not, beholding it, believe that things were anything like so bad as the Rev. Jabez Ham represented them.

Interrogated on the point Miss Yeomans said that of course they were not, and her voice had been most terribly scornful.

But then, no one insisted that Miss Yeomans should go to chapel, so that perhaps she didn't properly know. But at least she came to the Mission.

And it was at the Mission that Hilary disgraced himself by screaming aloud and having to be carried out. Afterwards he thought he would not have screamed but for the thunder-storm which broke at a moment already sufficiently alarming. For the preacher (not the Rev. Jabez Ham, but a stranger with a mouth ludicrously reminiscent of india-rubber or a dying codfish) had suddenly invited all those in the congregation who were going to heaven to stand up. Nobody seemed to have any doubts at all on the matter, and the whole congregation (save only Hilary) arose in a body. Very stiff and erect, Aunt Lavinia was standing with the rest, and but for the thunder-storm this fact might very well have comforted Hilary and preserved to him his dignity. Because one would not be extremely anxious to go to heaven if Aunt Lavinia were to be there. Heaven, somehow, was just a place where Aunt Lavinia was not. But the thunder-storm came and Hilary screamed. The storm and Hilary's screaming, the hallelujahs of the men, the whisperings of children and the stifled sobbing of women, all got mixed up horribly together, so that Aunt Lavinia, very red in the face, was forced to abandon the congregation momentarily halted *en route* for heaven, and carry Hilary out. And suddenly from a seat by the door Miss Yeomans arose. "It's all right, it's all *right*," she said to Hilary as he clung to her, but of Aunt Lavinia she took no notice at all. "To take a child to *that*!" she said later (and very scornfully) to someone else — rather as if she, at least, had discovered the "unforgivable sin."

Afterwards, of course, Aunt Lavinia said he had screamed on purpose because he didn't like going to chapel and hoped that way to get out of it. (That was the sort of mean thing Aunt Lavinia was always doing: so that you couldn't think of her without thinking of them. They stuck out behind her, luminously, like a comet's tail.) But Hilary didn't care what Aunt Lavinia thought or what she said, because from the day of the Mission he never went again to chapel, for Miss Yeomans had bearded his father in his philosophical den and had emerged with the satisfactory information that if the doctrines

of Calvin were not suited to Hilary's temperament he might try those of the Church of England. So Hilary went to the Parish Church (at reasonable intervals) with Ursula and found that he liked it.

2

Long afterwards when Hilary heard smart people declare that they thought the Church of England had died years before of inanition, he would remember those pleasant mornings in Yewhurst Church, and how, even then, it had seemed as if life and this business of church-going were two quite different and separate things. For all that, he found it pleasurable enough. He liked the music and the riot of colour in the stained-glass windows (that most of all, perhaps), and it was comforting to know that here, always, you might rely upon uninterrupted peace and quiet — and uniformly good behaviour. Under no circumstances whatever, could you imagine the man behind you or the woman in front rising in ecstasy and shouting "Hallelujah" or "Praise be to His Name," and these were things for which Hilary could never be sufficiently grateful. Yewhurst Church, so Ursula told him, was very old. The tower belonged to the thirteenth century, and there seemed to be a lot of reasons why you should admire it tremendously, even though some people to whom Ursula referred as the "Vandals," and with whom, as Hilary thought, she seemed unnecessarily wrathful, had "ruined" the main building by "restoring" it. The tower, so Ursula said, they had had the goodness to leave alone. She mentioned these people quite casually, as though they were a family she knew very well and disliked intensely. Hilary wondered who they were, but rather fancied they were all dead, like Grimm and Stevenson and Andersen, but Ursula said, "Dead? The Vandals? Good gracious, no. They'll never die. They'll still be living when you and I are dead and forgotten."

Hilary thought that if this were so there was not much hope for that thirteenth-century tower. There was still plenty of time for it to be "restored," and if the Vandals lived so long doubtless they would be glad of the occupation. He rather wished Ursula didn't dislike the family so much: it would have been distinctly interesting to have known one of the Vandals. . . .

3

It was very soon after this that the "tragedy of Annie" occurred. (Somehow that was how one used afterwards to think of it.) Annie had disappeared quite suddenly from Yewhurst Lodge and two days later they had found her body at the bottom of the deep green pond in a little dark fir wood through which Hilary had often walked with Ursula. He had overheard the milkman talking to Rayner, the Lodge gardener, about it and he had gathered that Annie had jumped into the pond because she was going to have a baby, and Aunt Lavinia had sent her away and she dare not go home. This to Hilary was all very mystifying, but it was less these things which troubled him than the thought that Annie, who had been so young and so nice to look at, was dead. They had dragged her body out of the deep green pond and the milkman and Rayner between them had told some dreadful tales of the ugly things green and stagnant water could do to you. To be dead when one was young — an awful thing, that. The most awful thing you could imagine. To Hilary, for ever tugged at the heart by the beauty of the thing seen and felt, who loved life with a white-heat intensity that never burned itself out, premature death was always an unspeakable horror. All his life it was extremely difficult to grasp the state of mind which urged any human being to this ghastly act of self-extinction; so difficult to envisage a set of circumstances which expunged the phantasmagoria of life like a wet sponge passed over a slate. Even as a child, this incident of Annie's death meant one thing only to him: that she who had loved to live was dead — dead to the stars and the winds — and that he would never see her pretty face again nor hear her gay voice on the stairs.

4

Out of the quiet level of happy days that ensued (for you couldn't, thank Heaven, think of poor Annie and the dank pond for ever) one or two things emerged into prominence. One (and not the least important) was Aunt Lavinia's departure from Yewhurst, her evangelical stomach having risen at last against the heretical doctrines of the Church of England which

she had, so to speak, been forced to swallow. In her place there came a new housekeeper who required nothing of you save that you should bow down to the chief of her domestic gods — the one with the brazen face called Punctuality. A bagatelle, that, for the small boy who had lived with an Aunt Lavinia.

But even more exciting than Aunt Lavinia's departure was Arthur Yeomans' arrival. Arthur was Ursula's brother and he came to Yewhurst Lodge twice a week to give Hilary the art lessons Ursula had discovered he ought to have. (Ursula always discovered things of this sort: she was as clever as all that — knew what you would love best to do before you knew it yourself!) Arthur Yeomans preferred Paris to London as a place of habitation, but had been driven to London by a love-affair which had gone awry and was going to remain like that for ever. And London being, to Arthur's mind, as insupportable as ever, he had turned his back upon it and come home to Yewhurst. Not that the miracle of his coming was explained like this to Hilary — to whom it was sufficient that he came. Because for Hilary it wasn't only the lessons he loved, but the man who gave them. Arthur's visits were a rich, rare pleasure to Hilary — a new subtle fragrance added unexpectedly to life, for as a child his capacity for friendship was remarkable. All the affection which in ordinary circumstances he would have lavished upon his mother contrived to get itself diffused across and along the pathway of life — like vivid colour spilled over the edge of some luxurious garden.

Two other things there were peeping up above the level, the death of Flossie, the little black cat, and the day when Ursula had suddenly sat down and cried, and someone cut little bits out of every paper that came to the house. . . .

Then a lot more happy days, another summer and winter, and presently the decision on somebody's part that he was old enough to do certain things for himself. Which meant that nurse packed up and went to look after someone else who could not. Somehow, it was nicer without nurse, and one felt delightfully free and grown up. Winter passed and spring and another summer, and suddenly came devastating news of Ursula's impending marriage and departure to Yorkshire, and in the middle of it all people went off to fight the Boers and Yewhurst village was hung with flags and everybody got tre-

mendously excited. But not Ursula and not Arthur (nor his father, who, of course, never got excited about anything at all). Queer things happened at this time, very difficult to understand. There was the afternoon when Arthur came in with a deep cut over his left eye from which the blood was running freely down his cheek, and who said nothing whatever as to how it happened, save (to Ursula, as she was bathing the wound), "My country — right or wrong!" There were also several other occasions when a mob of village youths and small boys foregathered at the gates of the Lodge and threw stones at the windows, and still other occasions (and by far the worst) when a new strange word came hurtling after them when Hilary went out walking with Ursula or Arthur. Personally, Hilary did not like being called a pro-Boer, and could not in the least understand why, when she heard it, Ursula should lift her head in that proud fashion, for all the world as if it were a term of honour and respect. And Hilary hated the mob that tossed the word about and spoilt these last few months he and Ursula had together.

For in the midst of the Mafeking demonstrations Ursula was married and went off to Yorkshire, leaving Hilary to support the trial as best he might on Cooper's Indians, Marryat's adventures on the high seas and Stevenson's terrible seafaring man with one leg. He retired into a booky world of his own from which he emerged at intervals to his art lessons and to take a fierce, unchildish joy in contemplating with passionate scorn the fervid displays of patriotism in which, these days, the village abounded. During the long walks with Arthur Yeomans, which helped to fill up the strangely empty days, Hilary's young mind was frequently occupied with subjects which, for the average boy of his age, do not exist at all. The germ of very many of those conversations remained with Hilary for the rest of his life. Unconsciously, these days, he learned to lift his head as Ursula had been used to do when that horrible word "pro-Boer" came winging after them, and which, for all his pioneer pride, never failed to send a cold shiver down Hilary's spine. He dreaded, even whilst he despised, the violence of the mob, though acutely conscious sometimes of an incongruous desire to rush blindly upon the big bullies who shouted insults at him in the village and smashed the windows

at Yewhurst. It was Arthur, too, who taught him the art of fisticuffs, and the two would conduct a sparring bout on Yewhurst lawn for the edification of such of the bullies as might happen to pass that way. It puzzled Hilary that the man who detested the war should be so keen a disciple of the art of self-defence; but then a good many things in life puzzled Hilary at this time. Besides, even if the displays on the lawn constituted but a fearful joy to Hilary, at least they represented an argument the village bullies could understand. That, always, to Hilary, was the use of this art he never learned to care for: it did represent an argument that one type of person could understand. The "type," he discovered later on, was distressingly ubiquitous. . . .

5

Ursula's departure was devastating. The bottom of Hilary's life had dropped out, leaving him suspended in mid-air, destitute of a foothold. For Ursula had meant so much. All unknowingly he had given to her the bright blossom of his love, so that his feeling for the mother who lived even yet in his memory had become rather like the pale wind-flowers that creep shyly up the hillsides. . . . And now Ursula was married and would, doubtless, have a little boy of her own. People did when they were married. Hilary did not understand these things.

And, anyway, *he* was to have nothing but tutors. . . .

6

They came. Four of them in five years. And, in each case, singularly cold-blooded, Hilary watched their flitting without a pang. Sandwiched in between their coming and going were wonderful visits to Yorkshire, where Ursula helped him to fall in love with the moors and with the Brontë sisters who belonged to them. She took him to see Haworth village and across to Stanbury Moor to the Waterfall and told him of the little black cat that, like Flossie, had died, and of "Keeper," Emily's dog, who followed his dead mistress down the flagged path to the

grave under the church pavement, over which no heather waved nor wind breathed requiem.

None of the tutors mattered, of course, but Hilary always considered that Mr. Carton was the best of them — perhaps because he was also the last. But Mr. Carton possessed yet another claim to the distinction of Hilary's preference — he was not in the least dismayed at his pupil's failure to be thrilled or held by the mysteries of *Pi. R²* and relative symbols. Mr. Carton, however, had an enthusiasm of his own — and that was for the art of writing shorthand according to Pitman. "You know nothing whatever about the construction of English words," this gentleman would say, "until you have mastered the principles of phonography. So peg away." And because even shorthand was preferable to "maths," Hilary pegged away with what will he could muster. He was never a good student of the wingèd art, and wrote outlines that Mr. Carton declared were "abominable for a boy who could draw," but he managed to attain the giddy stenographic speed of eighty words a minute and his sixteenth birthday somewhere about the same time. It was just at this point that something awoke his father to the fact of his existence, and he was requisitioned to assist (with Pitman) in the production of yet another of the dull tomes whose existence he deplored. How far Mr. Carton was concerned in this direful arrangement never transpired, but the fact remained that in the interest of a philosophical treatise for which he cared nothing, Hilary wrote his weird hieroglyphics for half an hour each morning and wrote them extremely badly. Pitman was a name to deplore, and yet they had made the man a knight.

A disappointing world, grown most suddenly and unbelievably dull. . . .

7

It was much duller by the end of June when Mr. Carton was hurried off by his doctor to some warmer climate and Arthur Yeomans went down into Norfolk to paint a portrait of an important somebody's small daughter. Mixed up with the dullness, however, was one week of delirious excitement when Hilary fell desperately and unexpectedly in love. It was an

idyll as brief as it was unexpected, lasting just exactly a week — which was the precise length of the holiday the charming young person was spending in the village. She disappeared as suddenly as she had come, and Hilary had no time at all in which to indulge his grief because just then there came a devastating letter from Yorkshire, written not by Ursula, but by the young doctor, John Wyatt, whom she had married. Ursula, it appeared, was ill: not very ill, but certainly not well enough to be bothered with Hilary (not that Dr. Wyatt put it in the least like that: that was Hilary's perverse reading of his letter). They would, however, expect to see Hilary at Christmas, when they would give him a good time and hoped to have a surprise for him. Surprises, of course, were all very well, but a "surprise at Christmas" Hilary thought was but poor compensation for no holiday in July. Life was certainly disappointing. There simply wasn't anything at all you could depend upon.

Things went on being dull and disappointing until Arthur came back from his portrait-painting, and then, just as they were beginning to get interesting again, telegrams flashed horribly between Yorkshire and Sussex, and Arthur, packing a hasty hand-bag, rushed off to Haxby Wyke, because that was the place where Ursula lived, and the telegrams said she was worse.

For a week Hilary lived with new and horrible thoughts of a universe in which Ursula was not. He was so dreadfully afraid she would die. But she did not. The end of August found her convalescing among the English lakes, from which she wrote to Hilary that she was almost well again, but that she was afraid there would be no "surprise" for him at Christmas, after all. As though Hilary cared in the least for that! But Ursula cared. It was many years before Hilary realised that she always had cared — that she always would.

In the midst of Ursula's convalescence — quite suddenly and wonderfully — school loomed on Hilary's horizon, for Mr. Carton's departure had proved the final straw in the breaking of the back of Ralph Sargent's prejudice against sending his son into the society of other boys. Even Pitman and the hated philosophical dictation could not dim for Hilary the bright radiance of those two things shining there on the horizon —

school at the end of September and his Haxby Wyke holiday at Christmas! They spelt something very like oblivion for his memory of the week-long idyll, which remained where Ursula's illness had pushed it — in some remote corner of his brain, inextricably mixed up with a page of shorthand notes. Properly he never disentangled it. Years afterwards when he thought of it at all it was always like that — as a grateful, restful oasis in the Pitmanic desert. . . .

8

But before Christmas came, the inevitable had happened. An old story was dug up out of its grave, most indecently, and Hilary found himself confronting it.

It was Carfax's fault, if fault is the word. Carfax had a stepmother — very well known on the Comedy Stage, so Carfax said, at any rate. And he was a beast — though in this particular instance he had not intended to be. He had merely thought that Hilary knew. It was the sort of thing that Carfax *would* think, of course. But when he found that Hilary didn't he had declared he could bring proof, in the shape of newspaper-cuttings, which he knew his stepmother had somewhere if he could only find them and if Hilary would promise not to "blab." Hilary, very white, had said, "Damn your newspaper-cuttings," but when Carfax turned up with them he read them every one and felt desperately sick afterwards. Because, no doubt about it, Carfax was right. These things had been.

That afternoon Hilary played goal for his House — and the House lost ignominiously. He had played, everyone said, a bally rotten game, not knowing that Hilary had not once thought of the game or his House; and that every now and then in his mechanical play he was handicapped by seeing neither players nor ball, but only a dank green pond in the middle of a little fir wood. . . .

Everyone was angry with Hilary: only Carfax stood up for him. But then Carfax was frightened — horribly frightened by the queer look in Hilary's dark grey eyes and that white, frozen face of his. And, too, Carfax was half afraid he wouldn't get his newspaper-cuttings back.

For months it was only that dank green pond Hilary saw when he allowed himself to think of that old story at all. The illicit relationship, the fact that his mother had "run away with some other fellow" (which was the whole point of the story to Carfax because that was the sort of person Carfax was) mattered to Hilary at this stage not in the least. It mattered later, but not so much and not for long. It might have mattered more and longer but for something else which had happened and beside which nothing was of the least importance. But here at sixteen the really dreadful thing about Carfax's old story was that the "tragedy of Annie" (that was how, all these years, it had stuck in his mind) had dragged its muddy trail across the delicate lovely memory that had lain so deeply enshrined in his heart — like a flower laid up tenderly in lavender. She who had loved to live had — there, at the last — simply not wanted to go on. You couldn't, somehow, believe it. . . .

Hilary did not see then — and, properly, he never did see — that there was any other tragedy in life that mattered beside this hideous one of dying before you were old — before you had lived, actually, at all. It was a thing so horrible it never should happen at all. It was outrageous that it ever could happen — to anyone.

He said so to Ursula in a long, not very coherent, letter that it made her sad to read, because she saw how it was. Hilary had grown up. To Ursula, who loved him, there was something infinitely pathetic in growing up at sixteen.

With the letter in her hand she stood for long at the open window, looking out across the broad dark moor, and her heart — as the hearts of women will — was crying bitterly for the little child she had kissed and comforted, and who, save perhaps in dreams, would never again come back to her.

BOOK II
SHADOW

CHAPTER ONE

1

FOR nearly three years nothing whatever occurred to break the even tenor of Helena Morden's life in that old house on the moor, save her occasional visits to Gertrude at "The Laurels," Wimbledon, and her discovery of Thomas Hardy, Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Mark Rutherford and Elizabeth Robins. She had said she did not want to go back to Putney, and as Aunt Milly had not been pressing she had remained in the family circle. That, however, was somewhat depleted these days, for Ted, who was to be a solicitor, having passed his "prelim.," had been taken into Edgar's office and home; whilst Walter (whose ambitions were less exalted) had been content, at eighteen, to go into a Bank at Halifax, and nowadays came home only for week-ends, the greater part of which time he spent at the white house at the foot of the hill, paying court to Cissie Ellingham. It amused Helena to watch her mother's consternation over that little affair: it was one thing to marry off your own daughters; quite another to see your sons desirous of performing that kind office for some other woman's daughters. Helena knew that in her mother's eyes poor negative little Cissie had utterly condemned herself in contriving to get born two whole years before Walter. That fact alone would have stamped her in Agatha's eyes as a designing minx out to catch her poor innocent boy, even if it had not happened that Cissie, with her big pathetic brown eyes and small pale face, had six other sisters at home, all unmarried. "The Ellingham girls were born to be old maids," Agatha would say and was distant to Cissie when Walter brought her home to tea. Helena was sorry for Cissie but she found the situation amusing. . . .

The news of Lucy's engagement to the Rev. John Elleker, a

curate at a Putney church (what *had* Aunt Milly been thinking of?) and her marriage only of a couple of months later, switched Helena's thoughts from Walter's undesired love-affair and fixed them upon an aspect of things that had never before occurred to her. "She was twenty-one: she had never been kissed. She would get left."

The phrases were her father's. Coming in, that March day of Lucy's wedding, from his speeding of the final parting guest, his eyes had fallen upon Helena standing there at the window looking out over the broad sweep of dark moor and he had blurted these things out at her as he opened the pages of his *Post* and turned his back on her.

"Twenty-one, and never been kissed! Well, it beats me!" he had said.

But Helena had never thought of it in that way before. She sat there at the window, with the shadow of coming evening upon her face, and burrowed deeply within her memory of the past, searching for something which might be dignified by the name of a love-affair. But not one could she find, for it was impossible to count the youth at the Wimbledon library who had introduced her to Elizabeth Robins and waxed enthusiastic over Hardy. With your head full of golden memories of the "blameless king" and bold Sir Lancelot, it was not to be expected that you could look with favour upon a red-haired boy who addressed you as "Miss," and who, when he met you in the road, snatched off his cap to the accompaniment of a blush as vivid as his hair. Perhaps one should not notice these things, but then, unfortunately, one does. And when you had said all you possibly could say for the library youth, there was simply no one else left.

Here, really, was the beginning of it all — the beginning of the gradual realisation of the process with which she had been concerned so long. She was waiting! For what she did not know — but that she must go on she was assured. There was no other way out.

And sometimes it seemed as though she was waiting for something big, something vast, impersonal. . . .

Then suddenly, surprisingly, "something" happened, though whether it was "big" and whether it was "vast" and "impersonal" was another matter.

2

It was some sixteen months after Lucy's marriage that Helena, coming into the house after a long walk across the moors on an evening towards the end of July, found her father deep in conversation with a tall, dark man whom she did not know, and who she imagined had come upon some matter of business. Her father's voice, breaking in upon her murmur of apology, had called her back.

"It's all right, Lena, don't go. This is our new neighbour, Mr. Courtney. He's building the house at the top of Hill Brow. . . ."

Helena had noticed the uprising house.

"Grey stone is so much nicer than red brick," she said to the stranger and quite unaccountably her smile deepened. She liked his face: it was frank and open, and his voice singularly low and charming for so big a man. After he had gone Helena agreed with her father when he said that he seemed a very "decent sort of chap," and then promptly forgot all about him.

But after that day it seemed to her that Mr. Courtney's calls upon her father became remarkably frequent, and one surprising day he drove down in his motor-car and insisted upon taking them out for a drive. Helena had sat at his side and had revelled in the motion and the breeze, wondering what it all meant and why the owner of such a beautiful car should be so anxious to take three such ordinary people for a drive. But as the days went on it became clearer, for Helena began to realise that somehow when this man called she was sure to be left alone with him during some part of his stay, and there had speedily come a day when he had arrived to find neither her mother nor her father at home, when he had urged her to let him take her for a drive—"just you alone"—when all her excuses were exhausted. It had been daylight when they started and Helena had enjoyed every minute of the run, but on the return journey the light was beginning to ebb and before they were half-way home it was quite dark. Presently she had felt the pressure of a hand upon her arm and quite suddenly the man's hand had closed upon hers. She had drawn away with a quickly-breathed "Don't, please don't," and for the rest of the homeward journey had talked quickly and unceas-

ingly, stricken with an unreasoning panic and a dread of something she dared not define. Two days later Mr. Courtney came to dinner and presently Helena found that once again they had the drawing-room to themselves, and, although she hated playing to any sort of audience, she was yet relieved when Courtney asked her to play the *Valse Triste* of Sibelius, because anything was better than these embarrassing *têtes-à-têtes*. She began to play with a rather uncertain touch, her mind anywhere but on the music, revolving every now and then the possibility of escape. But as though he divined her thoughts, Jerome Courtney moved to her side.

"You like music?" he asked.

"Yes — but I don't play well."

The man looked down at her and smiled, and Helena suddenly deserted Sibelius and invented weird and wonderful chords of her own, with an overwhelming realisation that she was powerless to prevent what she knew was coming.

"You are too modest," said the man, and there was that in his voice which made Helena push back the music stool in a sudden attempt to get away from the tall figure which seemed to be encompassing her. But Courtney was too quick for her; his hands caught at her wrists and he held her a prisoner, so that she was bound to listen to what he had to say.

"Look here," he began, "I want you to come and look over that house of mine. It's nearly finished . . . and there's the furniture, and the name. It must have a name, I suppose. Why can't you come to-morrow? I've asked your father and mother up to lunch. There's a lot to show you . . . and I want your opinion. Besides, well — I *want* you to like things."

"Why?" Helena's eyes met his steadily enough, but her heart was beating painfully, and all the time her wrists were twisting themselves between the strong hands that held them.

"What do you want?"

"You!"

Helena's eyes fell before the look in the man's.

"Let me go," she said.

"Not until you promise to come to-morrow. It's no use to refuse. I know my own mind and I always get what I want. And this time I want you."

After that Helena remembered very little about anything save

that she was suddenly caught in strong arms and kissed with a violence that took her breath away — that the door opened unexpectedly and that there was a buzz of sudden conversation, out of which her father's "With all my heart, my dear chap!" and her mother's "My dear Helena!" rose like a Greek chorus. And she suddenly realised that it was she herself who was standing in the midst of all this unfamiliarity . . . that she was pushing back her hair with one hand, and with the other was pressing her handkerchief to her lips, which, as she was dully aware, felt bruised and sore.

So this was what she had been waiting for!

"I wonder!" she said, as later she lay in bed and watched the moon and stars — symbols of infinity and spaciousness — through her unshuttered window. Certainly there was nothing vast, nothing impersonal about this "engagement" of hers. It was bounded by the circumference of that great house on the hill, and it seemed in some strange fashion to be connected with the unexpected appearance of her father and mother, and with a grey silent motor-car. . . .

And of love, once again, not one word had been spoken.

3

Other things, too, came in the space of the next few weeks to emphasize the personal note of this unfamiliar happening, and to deepen the sense of uncertainty and bewilderment in Helena's mind — new frocks, new hats, and the process of "trying them on"; congratulations, presents, visits, and above all, perhaps, the knowledge that for the first time one is a person of some importance in one's little family circle. Never before, indeed, had Helena met with so much approval; it seemed to her that with the arrival of each fresh day her surroundings became less real, gathered to themselves yet a little more of the similitude of a dream. It could not actually be she who was to marry Jerome Rutherford Courtney, one of the "Courtneys of Gloucester" as Agatha, middle-class to her finger-tips, was never tired of reminding her. Helena's mother had all the reverence of her class for "family" and "position," and it mattered not at all to her that the Courtneys of Gloucester were bankrupt; that their traditional home had been out of their

hands for a century or more, until Jerome's sister, marrying a wealthy American, had persuaded him to buy it back and adopt her name. Certainly the bankruptcy would have mattered enormously to Agatha had it extended itself to the fortune of that particular male representative of the family to whom her daughter (almost unbelievably) had become engaged.

To Agatha there was something eminently satisfactory in the reflection that Jerome Courtney's very comfortable income, though it owed its origin to an unexpected legacy, came now from the personal enterprise that had built up the successful motor-business with which his name was associated. Mrs. Morden loved a capable man—a man who could “make money and keep a wife decently”; and Jerome, she felt, was essentially a “capable” man, as the last dividend of Courtney Motors, Limited, bore witness. Money and family! What more could anyone, even Helena, desire? Nevertheless, in this case one was fain to admit that there was a good deal “more,” for the fates had endowed the Managing Director of Courtney Motors, Ltd., with the tall, broad proportions of his ancestors and contrived in a delicately subtle manner to blend the appearance of strength with an undeniable gentleness and amenity of manner. Over the natural amiability of his brown face, with its shrewd, penetrative eyes, there had grown with the passage of years another expression, difficult to give a name to, but which Helena's mother, forgetful for once of the Gloucester escutcheon, sought to explain as “rather the look of an American, don't you think—like one of those heads in *Harper's*.” The dominant features of the face were the square firm chin and the alert, shrewd but kindly eyes. It was the face of a man capable of tenacity and effort, of one who, against heavy odds, would reach his objective, so that, in a way, perhaps, Mrs. Morden was right.

The fact that Courtney was thirty-four and Helena only twenty-two was scarcely the sort of fact that was likely to hold significance for Agatha. A man, she would have said, could always “give a woman ten years at least,” and in any case it was not romance Agatha was looking for. Her philosophy was extremely simple, and did not deal in abstractions. For her, romance had ceased entirely to exist when, all those years ago, it had suddenly flown out of the window of that ridiculous little

house in Wandsworth; and now, at forty-seven, she was quite incapable of seeing any sort of objection to so desirable an alliance for Helena as that which here presented itself. Money and family! She went over them again. What more *could* you want? And again she saw how very *much* "more" there was! Agatha was essentially the sort of person who believed in the irrevocableness of marriage, just as she believed that, for womankind, it was a sort of miraculous panacea. Her word for Helena was "discontented," and well — if you were discontented after you were married at least you had the decency not to talk about it.

Angela Richardson-Courtney (Jerome's sister who had married the American) sent along an invitation within a week of her knowledge of the engagement; she was anxious, she said, to make the acquaintance of her future sister-in-law. The admission to her husband of an overwhelming curiosity to see what sort of creature Jerome was marrying may have been merely another method of expressing the same thing. But, anyway, Helena went to Courtney Towers, stayed a week and returned, to be plied with numerous questions from an agitated family. She showed, however, a strange reluctance to discuss either her visit or her prospective sister-in-law. It struck her as incongruous, somehow, that her mother should seem to think she had been expected to eat with her knife; and to talk a sort of jargon that no one outside Yorkshire could understand. But she conceded, in Agatha's phrase, that Mrs. Richardson-Courtney was a "very great lady indeed," adding, with that quiet air of finality from which there was no appeal, that she was also a snob. A hard saying that, to Agatha, who was wholly incapable of imagining a snob at the top of the social ladder; the word was associated in her mind with one thing only — the undignified struggle in which one indulged at the bottom.

As for the great lady herself, she wrote to her brother, a trifle darkly perhaps, that she had discovered something even more obstinate than the Courtney mouth — and that was the Helena Morden chin. Angela had perceived that Helena possessed "ideas," but ideas, of course, were only dangerous in a woman when she acted upon them, and that was not very often. Ideas, in theory, were picturesque enough: Angela passed Hel-

ena's possession of them with no more than a friendly nod of recognition — the same nod with which she indicated her consciousness of Helena's claim to good looks. Her dexterous prose touched on all these things with the imponderability of a gossamer-thread, but she spared her brother her written approval of his fiancée's satisfactory breeding. There were, it seemed, certain things which if you were wise you did not say to Jerome Courtney.

4

Nevertheless, there were moments when Helena revealed (even to her mother) just a hint of that uncertainty and bewilderment which Angela had noticed and which, indeed, were sweeping her off her feet.

"I can't imagine," Agatha said to her sharply one day, "how you can talk like that of the man you have promised to marry."

"That's just it," Helena had asserted. "I didn't promise, and I can't remember that he ever asked me."

Agatha, cautiously feeling her way, had remembered that little volume of Tennyson with its heavily scored passage, and she said: "Of course, dear, you can't expect things to happen quite as they happen in books."

Helena was coming to believe that was true: yet twenty times a week she decided that she did not want to marry anyone at all — certainly that she did not want to marry Jerome Courtney. She told herself that she liked him, of course; she was aware that she respected and admired him, and, too, that she had a lofty opinion of his character. The essential Eve in her was gratified by the evidence of his business capability, for success, after all, has its charm, and a powerful masculine mentality, say what you will, is always a compelling factor in the eternal game of the sexes, invigorating whilst it fortifies. Helena felt these things; recognised that in matters of intellect the Atalantean qualities meant a good deal to her. She would not have liked to have been loved by a fool. But in her feeling for Jerome Courtney there was no touch of romance; he did not thrill her; did not once find the key to that "something" deep down within her which clamoured so persistently for deliverance. This that she felt — this calm, level-headed approval

and cool deliberate amity — was surely not what the poets and novelists meant by “love.” But it might be, after all, that marriage — even though one went to it devoid of that great romantic feeling of which she had dreamed — did ultimately provide the “other” things, did come to give that meaning and purpose to life which, ever since she had begun to comprehend the facts of existence, she had seemed to lack. There was, too, the possibility that she might have children. Helena, rather pale, would draw in her breath at the thought, until she remembered Gertrude’s outburst of anger before Adrian was born, and the things that Gertrude and her mother had said of Lucy who was already expecting a second child, though she had been warned against having any more children. Her mother, Helena remembered, had blamed the Rev. John; Gertrude had blamed Lucy, calling her a Puritanic little fool. Their phrases had a way of floating menacingly back to Helena. No, an orgy of motherhood was certainly not what she wanted. She would hate to be discussed — like that. People talked as though marriage (no mention of love!) was the Open Sesame of a woman’s life. Very well! She was going to find out. For herself, and once for all, she would know. It was a risk, but anything was better than the stagnation of the last five years. Besides, *One must be venturesome and fortunate. What is one young for else?*

5

So on a windy October morning, and very quietly, Helena and Jerome were married in the Registry Office at Rattenby. It was Helena who had vetoed church and ceremony. “I won’t be married at all if I’ve got to have all that fuss!” she had said, and Jerome, to whom, as a matter of ethics, it made no sort of difference whatsoever, was secretly relieved to be spared the pageant. Instead of white satin and orange-blossom, Helena wore a plain tweed costume and a close-fitting hat, because immediately after the formality in that poky little room they started on the motor tour that was to be their honeymoon. There was no reception, and no guests were asked. “No anything,” as Agatha put it, in blankest disappointment. To her there was something almost indecent in the whole business. She knew people did get married in a registry office, of

course, but it was a thing no Burke had ever been known to do. A hole-and-corner wedding! It would be difficult to believe that Helena was really married!

Yet it seemed to Helena that it was an appallingly easy thing to accomplish — this business of marriage. A few moments only, but in them she had signed away her old name, her old life and, perhaps, her old freedom. The man at her side seemed almost a stranger. She had married someone she had only recently met, someone she hardly knew — and for just one moment she hated him; hated him because he was there, because he always would be there, and most of all because he didn't understand. The moment passed, and a very kindly voice was saying:

"I should button up, dear. There's a touch of the east about this wind," and even while she hesitated Jerome turned and began to button up the collar of the long coat she had slipped over the tweed costume her mother had so much deplored. Helena twisted in her seat a little, raising her chin, but even so she could feel Jerome's warm hands on her skin, and for one brief second she thought he was going to kiss her. She hoped passionately that he would not. Above all things, just then, she did not want to be kissed.

But Jerome made no attempt to kiss her, and Helena did not know that his fingers trembled still from contact with the smooth white curve of her throat. She sat quite still, her eyes gazing ahead at the wind-flecked, sun-dappled moor outstretched to right and left. And she was thinking of what her mother had said — that she couldn't expect things to happen quite as they happen in books. Yes, that must be it: she had expected the impossible; wanted too much, and yet . . . and yet . . . even Gertrude and Lucy had loved their husbands. But presently her thoughts wandered away into a kind of wonderment that she should still feel the touch of her husband's fingers against the curve of her throat. . . .

6

They stayed that night at an old-fashioned inn at the other side of the moor. Their bedroom window looked across to Haffington Ridge; a wild night of wind and cloud and shimmer-

ing stars had shut it out from view, but Helena knew it was there. Once, years ago, she had had tea with her sisters in this very inn. . . . Careless, free, unfettered she had been in those days and astoundingly healthily hungry. There had been eggs for tea and piles of freshly cut bread and butter. Smoothing her hair before the glass in the big bedroom she dismissed its memory that brought a lump to her throat. She had not known, till now, how happy those old free days had been.

It rained heavily all the night and the wind moaned dismally round the creaking old house that, desolate and grey, looked away over to Haffington Ridge. Helena could not sleep: she lay staring out into the darkness of the strange room, listening to the wind and the rain, wishing, almost, that she was out there in their midst. . . .

She was up, next morning, in time to see the sun heave himself proudly over the shoulder of the huge hill, and was dressed and ready to go out when Jerome stirred and opened his eyes.

"Hullo!" he said, "is it late?"

"No," said Helena, "two hours yet to breakfast." She found it a little difficult to believe that the man sitting up in bed and looking at her out of a pair of sleepy dark brown eyes was really her husband. She had never seen him before with roughened hair. He looked like a rather confused and happy schoolboy. He seemed more than ever a stranger — even after last night.

"What sort of a morning is it?" he asked, stifling a yawn.

"Fine," said Helena, "after the rain."

"Rain? Didn't hear it," said the man. "Couldn't you sleep?"

"No," said Helena, and then, "I'm going out for a walk before breakfast — over the moor."

She moved across the room and smiled down at him, her hand on the door-knob.

"Good-bye," she said.

When she had shut herself out of the room she remembered that she had not kissed him. And Jerome remembered it, too. For some time he lay quite still, staring at the ceiling, with but one recurring thought:

"She's got to love me. She *must*. She must. . . .I'll make her,"

There was determination in those brown eyes, but also there was an infinite tenderness. They expressed a pathetic inability to believe that she could never come to love him, for he loved her so much — she held his heart in her hands, and they were cold, cold. . . . But one day they should be warm and glowing. Lying there in the big bed in the sunlit room, with her empty place beside him, he swore it gently to himself.

7

Helena walked abroad in the chill freshness of the October morning, her face lifted to the south-west wind that sung in the trees and shook down from them their golden glory. Through the hurrying scudding clouds came dazzling beams of sunlight and patches of bright blue sky. The rainy night had converted the ground beneath her feet into an amazing, sparkling emerald. Moorland birds flew overhead, high above the rain-drenched earth, calling shrilly as they shot away into the unknown. A morning of flying sunlight and hurrying, fitful shadow, answering some deep unspoken need in Helena's soul. She strode on towards the grey shoulder of Haffington Ridge, luminous and enticing in the distance. . . .

8

Jerome came to meet her, and in his hand he held a little nosegay of violets — tempted into a second blooming by the mild south-west wind and the October sunshine. He had found them, he said, in the little wood at the back of the inn. They were the small dark variety like those that bloom in Italy in the first freshness of spring. Helena had never been in Italy, but a girl she had known at school had gone there once, and had sent her just such violets crushed in a letter, and had written that the graves of Keats and Shelley just then were covered with them. . . . She wondered why she should remember that now. . . .

They had breakfast in the window of a room overlooking an old-fashioned garden, with a tangle of orchard beyond. From where she sat Helena could see a glowing cherry-tree in full autumn dress shaming the still green gowns of its neighbours.

In the garden were clumps of Michaelmas daisies and tall white marguerites, golden-hearted, growing on each side of an old flagged centre-path, over which strayed a riot of bronze and orange nasturtiums. Here and there the bright spear of the tritoma plant shot up into view, and one blood-coloured rose bared a full heart to the warm west wind, whilst across the deep, mullioned window dropped very gently a golden fairy shower — drifting slowly and tenderly down from larch and lime. . . .

At Helena's breast were Jerome's surprising violets, and their thin sweet scent rose suddenly and drenched her in emotion. Her eyes, resting on the old-fashioned country garden, grew suddenly misty; something was taking her heart and squeezing it, though very, very gently. She wondered vaguely if she were going to cry. She had not cried for years. There had been so little to cry about. . . .

Then she looked away from the garden and her eyes rested upon her husband. He had been sitting there quite quietly, steadily regarding her. His eyes were kind and tender — as they had been earlier that morning when he had asked her if she had not slept. They met her own tranquilly, undisturbed. Impossible not to know what he was thinking. Slow colour crept into her cheeks: she smiled, and to Jerome her smile was like the morning — all sun and shadow.

“Coffee or tea?” he asked, smiling back.

“Coffee, please,” said Helena, and kept her voice from trembling.

CHAPTER TWO

1

THEY came home six weeks later. A sunset, typically November's own, reddened the sky. Through the bare branches of the trees the wind whistled ominously, and in everything the eye rested upon there was a hint of decay. The same tristful wind which sighed through the dismantled trees whirled the dead leaves tempestuously through the keen air — more than ever to-day they seemed to Helena as "ghosts from an enchanter fleeing." (No one, she thought, who knew that line of Shelley's could ever think of dead and whirling leaves in any other way.) Save for that one red patch in the sky there seemed no colour at all in the world. The cold finger of November had bleached the universe. . . .

Jerome's grey car wound itself round the long length of the Yorkshire roads, and Helena, comfortably ensconced in her corner, looked out upon the pageant of the passing of autumn, and found in it something unexpectedly pathetic. Autumn was the complement of summer, but it was also the harbinger of winter, and it was of winter, somehow, that one thought to-day. It was almost possible to catch a glimpse of his stern figure lurking, deliberative, among the shadows.

Helena, as she sat in her be-cushioned car, looked remarkably well. Her warm coat was close-buttoned to her chin. Her hair, with its hint of ripe corn, showed just here and there like a deep halo beneath the small close-fitting hat she wore. In the fading daylight her eyes were black, and with the assertion of the last bit of colour in the sky the tips of the upcurled lashes were touched with gold. There was a note of wistfulness in the curve of the finely shaped mouth, which looked redder than usual to-day — perhaps because the November breeze had beaten out the fine colour from her cheeks.

She looked like a gorgeous white butterfly dusted with the gold of pollen, or a porcelain vase with the wan light of the winter sun on it. Her hair and her mouth — and that red patch in the sky — made the one delicate note of colour in a sombre landscape.

She mused a little as she sat there, her eyes shifting at times from the hurrying countryside to the firm, broad back of the man at the wheel. Jerome was driving his own car; it was, she knew, an occupation he delighted in. You had only to look at him to know it too. From where she sat Helena could see the firm grip of his hands on the steering-wheel; the line of profile revealed to her showed the half of a masterful mouth, the sharp angle of an obstinate chin and one keen eye fixed on the leaf-strewn road beyond. A strong, capable man he looked: her mother was right. The thought struck her, as it had done before, that he deserved more of her than she had given him, more than she could ever give him. His very masterfulness had its attraction; she admired him intensely. There was a force about him that after six weeks of married intimacy drew her in spite of herself, but which yet left her free to look from the outside at her emotion — to stand afar off and view it as though it concerned someone else. It never entirely absorbed or overwhelmed her. She was so appallingly level-headed — so analytical — about it, and she had, all the time, a wild insane desire to be rushed off her feet. Had Jerome been capable of satisfying this unreasoning longing he might have had of her all that he wished. But he was not; even his masterfulness could not achieve it. Helena had succumbed once to that, but could scarcely do so again, for now she recognised it for what it was, and something of its magnetism had gone with the coming of that knowledge. What she wanted most of all (the thing that would have made all the difference) was still denied her — community of interests and ideas. She sighed, sometimes, with the instinct of gregarious humanity, for intellectual companionship, for the kindred spirit than which in all the world there is nothing more difficult to encounter. It was rather like that crock of gold where the rainbow ends, for which you looked as a child. . . . As you grew older you began to realise that nobody ever had found it. . . .

All the same, it was, if you came to think of it, a little depressing to realise that the man you had married looked at the world from an entirely different standpoint; a little dangerous, too, if you were as sure as was Helena that your own was on a higher altitude. She had seen already, and not without a pang, that Jerome regarded her passionate idealism with the slightly amused air of a master of facts. Quite honestly he was incapable of sharing his wife's faith in mankind: her enthusiasms or her indignations. (That was what struck Helena hardest — his apparent inability to feel indignant at the wrong life did to so many.) To Jerome it was simply incontrovertible that power and pelf ruled the world. You might not think it right that they should, but they did. That was the stark fact, and it was not going to be altered in a thousand years. He saw no meaning, no pathos, no appeal in humanity *en bloc*. If you wished to arouse his sympathy you must present your isolated case. He would not, Helena felt, be able to see, unaffected, a single instance of pain or distress, but the spectacle of a world in travail left him unmoved. His was the kind of mind that registered facts — simply, and in the main accurately. It did not, as Helena's was apt to do, turn them over and over, looking at them from every standpoint, letting them sink in and hurt. He was not callous; he would, she felt, be humanely ameliorative, passionlessly utilitarian, but the gods had endowed him with no desire for tidying up the world: its loose ends and torn edges neither irritated nor distressed him, and he thought about the world, on the whole, as little as possible.

It was precisely there that Helena, during these clairvoyant six weeks, had seen the difference between them to lie. Her feelings were in the melting-pot before Jerome's had left the refrigerator.

In his own fashion Jerome realised that, too, though it would not have occurred to him to express it in that way. There was, he thought, a good deal of high pressure about Helena's emotions; they bubbled over quite suddenly, to your utter bewilderment. That, really, was the joke of it — the unexpectedness of such an occurrence. For you'd never think it to look at her. She was so calm, so still. . . . It was with that quiet outward

seeming Jerome had first fallen in love. He admired, above all things, serenity in a woman, and Helena, that first evening he had set eyes on her, had looked as if she could keep still. She could, he found. She could do it so well, in fact, that you might never suspect the fire beneath the ice. . . .

But to Helena there was still another thing these six weeks in Scotland had revealed. She had seen (and not without a little inward sinking of an obdurate ego) that Jerome would have loved her had she possessed the brain and outlook of a pigeon — and she did not want to be loved like that.

3

Her face was wistful to-day as she sat there passing those six weeks in review: for to her eager and unsatisfied spirit it seemed as if, even now, she had not lived at all. Yet one big instalment of experience had come to her. She was a wife. With her husband she had been to the Highlands and back in a fast-running grey-padded car. They had stayed at fashionable hotels and met people of influence and position. She had worn many beautiful frocks and two at least that had been exquisite. People had paid her little polished compliments. She had heard whispered comments and had known herself envied and admired. But she sat there to-day with her wistful eyes fixed on a pair of broad male shoulders and wondered what it was that somehow she had managed, after all, to miss.

The big house on the hill that was henceforth to be her home loomed up at a sudden bend in the road and confronted her. The grey car began to climb the hill and Helena sat up, collecting her books and wraps, remembering suddenly that her father and mother were dining with them that evening. Probably they were there already — eagerly awaiting them. Her mother, she knew, would be effusive, would kiss her on both cheeks and tell her how well she was looking. Her father, quite as certainly, would remark that marriage appeared to agree with her, just as he had said it to Gertrude and to Lucy. He was so glad to have his girls married, he would never for one moment have permitted himself to think otherwise. Marriage, he felt, *ought* to agree with women, anyway; it was what they were here for. . . .

The car turned in at the dark-painted gate, swung expectantly back on its hinges, and Helena noticed that they had fixed a beaten-copper plate to it, bearing the one word "Windward." That had been her suggestion, since (as Jerome had insisted) the house "had to have a name." "Windward" had at least some claim to distinction, and even more to truth; for surely there was never a house through which the breezes chased each other more tempestuously. Helena had rejected "The Moors," "Moorside" and "Moorview" with quiet scorn of the obvious, and "Windward" had triumphed.

Following a straight neat drive the car drew up in a few seconds before the front door, and jumping out, Helena stood for a moment looking critically up at the house which henceforth was to be her home — for all the world as though she had never seen it before. Somehow to-day it looked aggressively new (despite its grey stone) and, too, aggressively prosperous. There was about it none of that quiet resolute dignity which hung like a close garment about the old inconvenient house farther along the road where all her childhood and young girlhood had been spent. "Windward," as yet, had no memories of its own. It stood there, desolate, stark — a sort of mushroom growth that had sprung up in the night and had not as yet had time to get used to its own existence. It seemed to apologise for its brightness and cleanness, as though it had no right there upon the lift of the moor that was as old as time.

In some queer fashion, too, it seemed this afternoon to be apologising for the man's cycle propped up rather helplessly against the wall of the porch. The front wheel was badly buckled, and the handles bent — sign and symbol of someone's serious spill. For a second Helena's thoughts jumped forward to her father and Walter, for both were reckless riders, and that hill outside was horribly dangerous. Only a year ago a man had been killed there . . . had broken his neck against the solid Yorkshire wall which ran along obliquely and unexpectedly at the bottom. . . .

Jerome, who loved his car as another man might his horse, was already making for the garage at the back of the house. Helena stood there alone, gazing idiotically at that badly buckled bicycle as if, in much the same way as the sight of the

house had done, it hypnotised her. She pushed open the folding glass door that counteracted the too-brazen hospitality of that wide-flung outer portal, and went in.

4

Years afterwards Helena remembered just how it happened, just how strangely excited she had been, as if something of tremendous import to herself had come to pass. The incident contrived to get itself inscribed on her brain — the advancing figure of her mother, hands outstretched; her father coming out of a smoky background; the parental kisses and embraces; her own little feeling of repugnance because her father exuded, as he always had exuded, the smell of stale tobacco; the pleasant tinkle of the tea-things in an adjoining room, and her mother's voice blurting out her little bit of news.

"My dear! there's been an accident! Really, *too* bad on your first evening."

But above all she remembered always that queer pounding of her heart, a deep painful thudding working quickly upwards to her throat, and then, quite suddenly, ceasing altogether, as though the tiresome organ had suddenly realised its own absurdity. She listened quite calmly to her mother's account of the accident, wondering what it was she had for that instant feared — and for whom.

"It was at the foot of that dreadful hill . . . just as we came along. A young man . . . oh, *quite* young . . . on a bicycle . . . took the hill much too quickly. . . ."

Helena heard herself enquiring if the young man was hurt.

"Broken arm, by the look of it," said her father, unusually laconic. "Shaken up, too, you know. . . . We had him brought in here . . . in the morning-room . . . felt sure you and Jerome wouldn't mind."

"Of course not. You've sent for the doctor?"

"He insisted that we shouldn't." This was her mother, awkwardly apologetic. "He is staying at Haxby Wyke and says he can easily get across there to-night."

"How? On that buckled machine, and with a broken arm?" The questions were almost a challenge; Agatha became more apologetic than ever.

“He said something, my dear, about a train.”

“How long has he been here?”

About half an hour, they thought; they knew they came early to avoid the dark. Helena threw down her wraps on an adjacent chair and walked over to the telephone. They heard her call up Dr. Walton, and give clear, crisp directions to the maid at the other end. The receiver went back into position with a little snap. Agatha, beside this arrogant young daughter of hers, felt like a child of six. Of course she *ought* to have sent for the doctor, but the young man was so very insistent, and besides, it wasn't *her* house. It was just like Helena to repair the omission in that way, without saying a word. She *was* difficult; it was no use to pretend otherwise; an extraordinarily self-possessed young person, always adjusting other people's mistakes, or giving you the impression that she could if she wanted to. And here she was now, looking at you with that distressingly straight glance, and asking a seemingly simple question with that dull even note in her voice that Agatha had never yet learnt how to combat, and probably never would.

“Do you know who he is, mother — what his name is?”

And of course Agatha didn't. It *would* happen like that. It simply hadn't occurred to her to inquire. It hadn't occurred to either of them . . . they had been so upset . . . so flurried. . . .

They breathed, the pair of them, a little sigh of relief as Helena opened the morning-room door and disappeared.

5

There on the threshold a strong smell of brandy assailed her, and her spirit of youthful impatience relented somewhat. At least they had had the sense to give him that, and someone had even remembered to make up the fire! It flickered now in a jerky blue flame that lighted up the half-dark room. The windows were open; the curtains flapping wide in the cold breeze that was sweeping into the room. A rustling poplar, guarding the house like a sentinel, gave the impression of rain, and that faint reassuring tinkle of the tea-things made you think, pleurably, of a fire and a close-drawn comfortable chair. Helena could just see that the man lying sideways in

the chair by the window was young, and it was quite easy to tell that the arm hanging limply over the chair was broken. The blue flame of the fire, resting fitfully upon the motionless figure, revealed to her a white face, rather tense, as if with pain. The eyes were shut, but as she entered they opened and a voice — it was a rather charming voice — said from out the twilight:

“I beg your pardon. I’m afraid I’m being a very great nuisance.”

Again to Helena there came that little thrill of excitement surging over her resolute calm.

“Oh, please don’t apologise,” she said, “I’m so sorry you’ve come to grief,” and she turned to rescue the white curtain from the misty dampness of the November afternoon. The red patch in the sky had faded out. Before Helena now the great moor stretched away like some colossal monochrome. Heavy banks of cloud shut out the thin, new moon that earlier she had seen straggling faintly up the heavens. She shivered a little while she stood there, with some difficulty securing the window against the strong breeze that fought hard to drag it backwards from her hands. There was something this afternoon rather sinister in the look of the sombre world she was shutting outside. The half-dark room and the warm blue flame of the fire were suddenly reassuring, comforting elements. She turned back to them — and to the young man in the chair. Upon him she let her eyes rest, a shade interrogatively perhaps; a little, just a very little (and most surprisingly) at a loss for what to say. She was conscious of the sound of familiar voices drifting in with that pleasant music of the teacups, through the half-open door; she wondered, just for a fraction of time, if they would remember to bring him some tea, and then, quite abruptly, her thoughts came to an end, for as she looked down upon the young man in the chair she was once more conscious of that queer, quite painful thudding of her heart. His paleness seized sudden hold upon her, accentuated as it was by the fantastic blue flame from the fire. Someone had loosened the soft collar of his shirt, and he tried now, as she looked at him, to pull it round again into position. The faint, uncertain smile with which he relinquished the effort, for one brief second turned up the corners of his mouth in a way that seemed to

Helena most tremendously pathetic. It was a vivid mouth — a red flame on ice, curiously beautiful. And his hands were beautiful, too. It was a trick of Helena's to notice hands; there was, she fancied, an eloquence about them not to be denied. You might, if you were clever enough, control your mouth and your eyes, but your hands would give you away, after all. . . . As for the eyes of the young man in the chair, it was impossible in this light to discover anything at all about them, save that they seemed to be fixed on her face and that the lashes which shaded them were dark. There seemed, too, to be something else about them — something that made you want to look at them again. But that, whatever it was, was a secret jealously guarded just now by the impish flame from the fire. Helena's heart filled suddenly with compassion: ardent concern looked out of her eyes. And, above all, she was oddly excited; she wanted to speak, but was afraid lest her voice should betray her. She stood there, not even wondering why she did so, or why her capacity for speech had so surprisingly deserted her.

The stranger, not shifting his position in the least, returned her scrutiny with interest. He saw a young woman, bare-headed, her hands deep-buried in the big pockets of the dark coat she wore, regarding him from what seemed to be an enormous height. Later, it was strange to recall that first impression of his that she was unusually tall, because, actually, he could give her a good half-inch. . . . He wondered if her eyes were really as black as they looked in that queer blue flame, and if her face were indeed the cold mask it seemed. Even in this light he could see that her hair was beautiful; he could trace the crisp wave in which it swept back from her forehead, and there was a sheen on it, wavering and fitful now, as the light of the dancing blue flame leaped ecstatically across it. His eyes met hers, and for a few seconds they remained thus, silently regarding each other through the deepening twilight. It was the man who broke the spell — by an indiscreet movement of his body in the depths of his chair, and a recurrence of that faint, upturned smile, which this time broke off midway into a little twist of pain. He was suddenly conscious that his arm was hurting him atrociously. He saw a little quiver pass over the white face of the girl — as if something were hurting her too. There was a red-hot needle running up and down his

arm in a perfectly sickening manner: he hadn't known anything could hurt quite so much. He wanted to go on staring at that white face in the dusk, but his eyes wouldn't keep open. For a moment he had a queer idea that the white face began to dance, keeping a rhythmic measure with the ecstatic blue flame, and that the ceiling had lowered itself several inches as if in a spiteful attempt to fall down and crush him. His eyes refused altogether to regard any longer these strange phenomena; they closed resolutely against his desire to know whether the white face was really dancing or not.

Helena came to her senses. She poured out some brandy and carried it over to the half-unconscious figure in the chair. The firelight flickered eerily over the white face on which the thick lashes were making long dark shadows. Against the black cushion of the chair the white face was startling — like ivory on ebony. She slipped an arm beneath his head and administered her draught. After a few seconds the man opened his eyes and found that the red-hot needle had called a truce.

"I say," he said, "I'm being a most unholy nuisance."

Helena removed her arm and turned to put the empty glass upon the table. It went down with a sharp little rattle, because for some unknown reason her hand was trembling.

"Oh, no," she said, "I'm quite sure your arm must be dreadfully painful. It was very wrong of you to dare my mother to send for the doctor."

"But I really don't want a doctor. I don't want to be a confounded nuisance. If you'd just find out for me about that train back to Haxby Wyke. . . ."

"The last train's gone," said Helena, quite untruthfully, "and I'm surprised you shouldn't know that a broken arm is usually far less painful when it's set."

"Good Lord! you don't really think it's broken, do you?"

"I should say there is no doubt."

"Oh, good Lord!" the young man said again, as if he could think of nothing else at all to say, "you do seem positive. Do you know, I never thought it might be broken? But if I can hang out for an hour or two I can get back to Haxby Wyke and Wyatt'll set it for me. Wyatt's a doctor, you know."

"Yes . . . I guessed that, but you can't 'hang out for an hour.' Do please be sensible. Your room is being got ready

for you now. . . . I've already sent for our own doctor. It's quite impossible for you to go home to-night, and if you say anything more about such a ridiculous project I shall begin to think you're like the young man in Barrie's book — and that you haven't really hurt yourself at all."

The corners of the vivid mouth slid up again, in the wake of the faint, whimsical smile, for this young man had read his Barrie.

"Sentimental Tommy, you mean — the chap who smashed his own foot in the door? Well, I disown the relationship. I'm not a bit sentimental."

"Then don't you think you ought to behave as if you weren't? You can't be a Don Quixote with a broken arm. . . . Oh . . . but it really *is* broken, you know. If your friends are on the 'phone I'll just let them know what has happened to you and that you will be spending the night here. Really, you see, there's nothing else at all to be done."

The young man did seem to see that. At any rate, like a rational being he gave Helena the particulars she wanted. His name it appeared was Sargent — Hilary Sargent (a nice name, thought Helena) and he was staying over at Haxby Wyke with some old friends, a Dr. and Mrs. Wyatt, at the Red House. Yes, they were on the 'phone all right. He had cycled over from Haxby Wyke to finish a little sketch of Haworth (then *he* loved the Brontës!). A particularly fine sunset had tempted him across the moor to Rattenby, and half-way down that beast of a hill his brake had refused to act. She knew the rest, didn't she?

Helena nodded, her mind on the facts. And then something happened — something totally unexpected, preposterous almost. Three musical syllables, uttered in Mr. Sargent's equally musical voice, flung themselves softly upon her through the quivering blue-flecked twilight of the room.

"Deirdre. . . ."

She turned, faintly aware that this young man should be snubbed. Every canon of her class and upbringing would have insisted that this was her proper course — that the young man deserved it. Five minutes ago he had never set eyes upon her and he could not possibly imagine that Deirdre was her name. She knew that she ought to be angry — not *very* angry,

perhaps, but just angry enough to put this young Mr. Sargent quietly back in his place. But somehow (and she realised it with a sort of inward panic) she wasn't angry, not even in the very least. She was only intensely surprised. She stood there with her hand on the black knob of the door, and she didn't say anything at all. Long, conical shadows played bo-peep with that whimsical flame from the fire, and as she waited the new moon slipped out from the clouds and stood looking at her through the unshuttered windows. Helena glanced up and saw it — a thin thread of silver on a black gown. . . . It was always so that she saw it when this scene came back to her in the long afterwards. Until that day when she couldn't bear to think about it any more at all. . . .

But the young moon peeped at her now as she waited — and she *hadn't* put Mr. Sargent in his place. Mr. Sargent remained precisely where his daring had placed him — wherever that might have been.

“Deirdre . . . if you really think it's broken, will you please tell Mrs. Wyatt it's the left arm? She'll think that no end important.”

It was extraordinary. He had called her by that ridiculous name again, and still she had said nothing. Instead, across the gathering darkness she gave him a long, slow smile, and one lingering look out of her blue-black eyes. The fickle flame and the thin young moon combined forces against her, and revealed both, suddenly, to the man who had not been snubbed.

The door opened and shut. She was gone.

Extraordinary. That, really, was the only word for it! Why hadn't she snubbed him? Of course he deserved it. She had been supremely foolish; worse than that, supremely undignified. She caught her breath quickly as the door closed softly behind her. Why, it would have been so easy to have done the right thing. She need only have told him who she was. . . .

Outside it was nearly dark, save for the thin shaft of light that came from the half-open door of the drawing-room on the other side of the hall. She could hear the subdued murmur of conversation as her father and mother waited there beside the fire until she should come in and pour out tea for the first time in her own house. She fancied that she no longer wanted any tea . . . that by now it must be too late.

A maid crossing the hall turned up the light and Helena saw that it still wanted ten minutes to four. That extraordinary interview had taken up not quite five minutes of time. Yet it had seemed to her like Eternity . . . as if nothing had happened to her before and nothing could happen again. The sudden flood of light switched her back quite painfully into the present and left her wondering why it was she hadn't thought of turning on the light — in there — instead of leaving herself to the impish mercies of a blue flame and an impudent moon.

She took down the telephone book and ran her finger slowly down the list of W's. Wyatt . . . Dr. John . . . and as she did so the thought struck her that it was queer her father and mother should be sitting there by the fire waiting for her to come and pour out tea from her new silver teapot — just for all the world as though nothing at all had happened. Well, and what *had* happened?

The door swung open and Jerome Courtney's tall figure stepped into the light.

6

Lying very still in the firelight, Hilary was conscious not of the dull pain in his arm, but of a queer throbbing of his pulses, and a restless desire that Helena should come back again into the room. He could hear her clear voice on the telephone; heard her say good-bye and guessed that the receiver had been hung up in position again. She was coming back! Curse it, no! Someone outside there was engaging her in conversation — somebody male, with a deep bass voice. He heard her laugh — a little delicate laugh that broke across the slight murmur of conversation like the soft pattering of rain on dry leaves. Why didn't she come back? He wanted to look at her again. She had been lovely in that queer light, unbelievably calm and white, like a big star in a black sky. It was almost worth while to have risked one's neck down that crazy hill just for the sake of looking at her in that flame-flecked room hung about with shadows, and with the night coming down swiftly on the black moor beyond. He had a sudden desire to paint her as

she had stood there in the dusk, with her white face and gleaming hair silhouetted against the blurred outlines of the room. The look of her head was startlingly clear to him even now; he remembered its delicate poise, the way in which the blue flame every now and then had revealed its outline, and the pale aureole that was her hair. He would call his picture Deirdre — Deirdre of the Sorrows, “pale as the coat of swans” — for that was how he had thought of her first. He could imagine her walking the hills at night, rain-dripping before the wind. She had suggested, even in this light, the stinging downpour and stiff breeze of the uplands — and a cold bath in the morning. He hadn’t intended to call her Deirdre at all — it had just happened! And, by Jove, how well she had taken it!

The pain in his arm had certainly dulled; it was pleasant to lie there so quietly, watching that desultory fire-flame play hide-and-seek with the shadows, his thoughts revolving round the girl whose voice tantalised him now through the shut door. That long, slow smile of hers — and that lingering wistful look — he could see them yet, though perhaps she had not meant that he should see either at all.

There came again, through the closed door, that little sound of delicate laughter, shivering his idle dreams into a thousand insignificant pieces. It was heartless of her to laugh, and he lying there with a broken arm — at least, she *said* it was broken, and she seemed to know. He was seized again with a restless longing for her return. It was getting dark: the blue flame was almost spent; when she did come in he would not be able to see her. Perhaps the firelight had been kind to her. Perhaps when the room was lighted . . . Oh, curse them, whoever they were! Why didn’t they let her come back? Another voice now — and another! Everyone might talk to her, it seemed, but him!

Then, quite suddenly, the door opened and Helena appeared on the threshold. Hilary turned his head quickly — much too quickly; was conscious of a sharp, intolerable pain in his arm, and of yet another sickening lunge of the ceiling towards him. Then the shadowy face in the doorway faded out very gently on a sea of blackness.

Helena, switching on the light, saw that he had fainted.

He thought, when presently emerged from that engulfing sea, that he must have dreamed someone called her "Mrs. Courtney" and someone else, "Helena." Neither name belonged to her; and it was supremely ridiculous that she should have any right to the prefix.

Then the black waters receded further and the incongruous names fell again on his ears. He opened his eyes and looked at her. She had taken off the enveloping coat, and was standing quite close to him, just there by the window, talking to a tall dark man in tweeds and to another who wore professional black. She was smiling a little, twisting a ring on her finger; and as he looked at her there came again to him the strange illusion that she was unusually tall. . . .

Helena turned, caught his glance, and paused in her conversation. Without trace of embarrassment or self-consciousness she came at once towards him, still with the ghost of her smile upon her lips.

"Mr. Sargent," she said, "may I introduce my husband? Mr. Courtney, Mr. Sargent. And my very old friend, Dr. Walton, to whose tender mercies I am going to leave you. I am sure that if there is such a thing as painless bone-setting, Dr. Walton will accomplish it."

The three men shook hands and said the usual things. By the time they were said Helena had disappeared and an immaculate maid stood on the threshold. She had come, she said, to show Mr. Sargent to his room.

They followed her, a silent trio, up the broad oak staircase.

Hilary roused himself to talk as Dr. Walton set and bandaged the broken limb (she had been right — it *was* broken) and by the time the operation was completed he had discovered all there was to know.

"A remarkably good patient," Dr. Walton said, as he took his leave. "One would have thought I'd scarcely hurt you at all."

Hilary's smile had been enigmatic. He was thinking that what the doctor had said had hurt, by comparison, so much more than what he had done. Left alone, he lay quite still, and by degrees he forgot everything save that long, slow, smile of hers dividing the dusk. . . .

But presently there rose up quickly and confronted him a pale, pitiful ghost, climbing up softly out of the past — the ghost of a young boy who had cried his heart out over a batch of brutal newspaper-cuttings. Icy little phrases floated out to him . . . odd little sentences that pieced an old story together again with surprising rapidity, an old story that Hilary had always hoped he might one day forget.

Later on someone brought in his dinner, served beautifully on a tray of dark oak. The "someone," whoever it was, propped up his cushions and said something kind that he didn't seem properly to hear. Whilst he ate, that pitiful desolate ghost stood yet at his elbow, and once when he awoke in the night he saw that it was still there. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

1

DR. WALTON kept his patient in bed for the whole of the following day, and in the evening Jerome went up to spend a couple of hours with him, leaving Helena to her correspondence down there in her mauve drawing-room that was an exquisite expression of her sudden passion for purples — the chromatic aspect of a mood. A maid came in and drew the soft amethyst curtains, shutting out the blackness that had crept down over moor and house alike. The fire crackled cheerily, the sparks sped up the wide chimney, and from the cup the maid had placed at Helena's side arose the delicious appetising smell of expensive, excellently made coffee. But from the room overhead there filtered through to her at intervals a faint tantalising murmur of conversation. She wondered what they were talking about . . . what things this rather surprising young man was interested in. Every now and then she heard Jerome's laugh — the good-tempered chuckling laugh of his that she was coming to know so well. It became, presently, impossible to string her polite sentences together, so that the letter-writing had to be abandoned. When Jerome came down he found her curled up on the divan with a book. By the light of one small globe at her side she appeared to be reading.

"What a bookworm it is!" he said, making room for himself on the edge of the divan.

Helena didn't tell him that Browning no more than her epistolary efforts had been successful in shutting out that overhead interstitial conversation. But she shut Browning up and dropped him, very gently, on to the floor.

Jerome edged a little further on to his precarious seat, and with a careless hand switched the room into sudden gloom.

"Your man's nice," he observed.

"My man?"

"Well, somehow I associate him with you. You took him in hand, anyway."

"Did he tell you that?"

"Oh Lord, no. I can't remember that we mentioned you. It was your mother who told me he'd refused to let her send for the doctor."

"Oh *that!* I only told him to be sensible. What have you been talking about?"

"Crowds of things — politics, finance, the suffragettes, art, religion. . . ."

Helena laughed.

"I thought it *sounded* interesting," she said. "Let's take art first. He paints, doesn't he?"

"How do you know?"

"Quite simple. He admitted that he'd been over to Haworth to finish a sketch."

"It's a good sketch — even I know that."

"You've seen it?"

"I have. The artist suggested that we might like to keep it . . . as a grateful acknowledgment for 'all our kindness.' His phrase, I assure you."

"And of course you accepted it?"

"Well, yes, but hardly with such indecent haste."

Again Helena laughed.

"Where is it?"

"I put it down most carefully over there on the Bechstein."

"Let me see it."

"Presently. We're too comfortable to move."

His fingers caught hers and held them.

There was a little pause.

Presently:

"Interest evaporated?"

"Don't be silly. Anyone would think there was a whole army of artists falling over themselves on our doorstep. I don't believe I've ever seen one before. Tell me. Has Mr. Sargent got a real studio of his own?"

He had, Jerome said. In Chelsea.

Helena had heard of Chelsea.

"Go on," she said.

Jerome went on. Mr. Sargent, it appeared, not only had

a studio and spent the days in painting pictures, but he also exhibited them.

"At the Academy?"

"Well, I fancy he didn't seem awfully bucked about the Academy. There were several other galleries he appeared to think licked the Academy into a cocked hat. One of them hung a thing of his last year . . . something out of Keats, he said. I can't remember what it was."

"Oh — Jerome!"

"Well, you can ask him about it to-morrow. By the way, the Mrs. Wyatt he's been stopping with at Haxby Wyke was his governess. She married and came up here to live when he was a youngster, so he told me. He calls her Ursula."

The big log on the fire slipped with a little crash and threw up a spray of blue-gold sparks. The aspect of the room changed — became faintly reminiscent. Helena's fingers twisted restlessly beneath those of her husband.

"Jerome, can't I see the picture now?"

"Presently. . . ."

"But it's so dark in here and you don't like the twilight. . . ."

"Yes I do — sometimes. I like it now."

"I want to see the picture, Jerome."

"The picture can wait. I'm enjoying the twilight."

"Please, Jerome. . . ."

He looked down at her, smiling.

"What's the hurry? Aren't you comfortable?"

She watched the track of the blue flame as it hovered over his face, and of a sudden she saw, not Jerome at all, but a thinner, paler face altogether, with a red streak for a mouth that curled up every now and then at the edges, surprising you. . . . She made another effort to release her fingers — as abortive as the rest. Jerome sat there still on the edge of the divan . . . looking down at her, smiling, and with his fingers round her rebellious ones.

"I like that gold thing you've got on. . . ."

"You've seen it at least twice before."

"Have I? That doesn't prevent my liking it. . . ."

"Of course not; but you should have admired it the first time I put it on, not the third Oh, Jerome, *please*, I don't want to be kissed. . . ."

Later in the evening Jerome rang up the Red House across the moor and asked Dr. and Mrs. Wyatt to lunch with them on the morrow, when it was hoped that Mr. Sargent would be well enough to return with them. The invitation was accepted: but it struck even the unobservant Jerome that if Mr. Sargent were pleased about it he had a remarkable way of showing it, or rather, of concealing it.

The next morning, half an hour before the Wyatts were due, Hilary came down into the drawing-room and found Helena busy again with her letters. She looked up as he entered and pushed back her writing-pad, as though the letters could wait.

"Oh no, finish them please," he said, and picking up the *Confessions of a Fool* began to read.

Helena flushed a little as she bent again over her letters, remembering that moment of yesterday. An impression of cheapness stole over her and a little smarting sense of shame. This young man was showing her what she should have done then. Very politely, but quite unmistakably, he was putting her back in her place—in the place from which she had stepped when, a young married woman, she had allowed him, unchecked, to call her by a ridiculous name. And having put her there he was keeping her there—more with Strindberg's aid, he was building a remarkably stout high wall between them. Soon she wouldn't even be able to see over the top. Her head bent lower.

That was Hilary's opportunity. Basely deserting his ally he looked up and with penetrative critical eyes began to study the line of profile outlined for him against that background of amethyst. It had, he saw, just that touch of imperfection which lends fascination, the pleasurable tantalising suggestion of shortcoming which makes you look a second time to discover wherein exactly it lies. Hilary decided this morning that the fault—only that was not the word—lay in the strange little tilt at the end of the nose that seemed to have begun with the intention of running perfectly straight and at the last moment had whimsically altered its mind. Hilary half suspected that at times that infinitesimal upward inclination was not there at all—that it was all a question of mood. There was, this

morning, a fine, quick-moving colour in her cheeks. He could see it ebbing and flowing beneath the white skin — like wine seen through an opalescent glass. So, he thought, might Deirdre have looked when the hot eyes of Connachar devoured her, or when, unseeing, Naois, with his brothers, passed her on the hillside. . . .

Presently a thin unexpected shaft of sunlight came bursting triumphantly through the window where Helena bent still over her letters. If it surprised her she did not look up and the daring sunbeam hovered lightly to and fro about her, making a little dancing point of light on the nape of her bended neck and entangling itself ridiculously in the maze of her hair. In that pale wintry gleam her head had a burnished look. The loosely braided coils of hair, close to but not over her ears, gave to the profile a certain balance and poise. Hilary wondered what colour her hair was when you saw it in the shadow. At this moment she reminded him of an October morning — russet and gold — of dying bracken in sunlight. There was warmth and colour and feeling about her: it was not, just now, of a white ghost on the hillside that you thought when you looked at her.

And Helena went on writing, holding her pen in the light friendly manner of the born calligraphist. Watching her Hilary had a sudden idea that she was writing mechanically a formula she had used many times already — the pretty gracious note of the bride of six weeks (Dr. Walton had given him that piece of information). She was thanking numerous friends and relatives for presents and congratulations, using, probably, the familiar first person plural, the intimate “we.” Somewhere far back in his brain a pulse was beating madly. Fate had smiled at him once — a smile of ineffable sweetness — and then had slammed a heavy door in his face, cutting the smile in twain. He felt suddenly tricked and impotent — realised, for one appalling instant, that fate had him already gagged and bound.

In Helena’s mauve drawing-room there was no clock. Utterly noiseless, her pen moved swiftly over the paper. You could have heard a pin drop. And all the time, with that curious little air of stealth, Hilary sat there watching. It made

him supremely happy just to sit there like that looking at her. He hoped she wouldn't look round. The wall was down between them for the moment, but he held a page of his book very carefully between his thumb and finger, ready to turn it at a moment's notice if she moved in his direction. And with the turning of the page up would go the wall again. . . .

Helena did not look round, but presently she wrote her last word, and as she put down her pen Hilary ostentatiously turned his page, as though completely unaware of the vagaries of a stray sunbeam on blue and gold, or of the decisive rattle of a malachite pen on a bronze tray. You might have supposed that for him Strindberg had blotted out the universe — gold-blue figure and all.

Slipping her letter into its envelope Helena turned her head and looked at him. She was ready to swear that he wasn't reading at all. . . .

"Have you read much Strindberg?" she asked.

For a very little while after that it was Strindberg they talked about. Helena detested Strindberg and the things he wrote — as she detested all the people who divided the world into male and female and chalked a thick line between the divisions. And, though Hilary seemed to agree with her, it was not long before he dismissed Strindberg as a false ally. He had drawn fire. Helena sat very still, her eyes fixed meditatively on the garden beyond. She had a remarkable capacity for stillness. It spoke of strength and reserves of strength. It came to Hilary that there was about her no undue emphasis of womanhood. Her eyes — blue, not black, as he saw to-day — were clear and frank as a child's. There was in her no trace of coquetry; she appeared to have no feminine tricks. Sex, in Helena, was a delicate suggestion rather than a definite statement, and it was that which set her apart — which differentiated her from all those other women he had known, who had carried their womanhood like a flaming sword in front of them.

When next she spoke it was not of Strindberg.

"Mr. Sargent. Are you sure you really want us to have your sketch of Haworth?"

Her glance shifted from the garden. It made, as it passed him, a scarcely perceptible pause, coming to rest on the Bech-

stein grand where, wistful and tender, the sketch made a luminous patch of delicate colour. Against that Ethiopic background it attracted the eye as a jewel the sun.

Hilary's eyes followed Helena's.

"If you will accept it, yes," he said.

"But how can you bear to part with it?" She walked across to the piano and stood there looking down at the water-colour. She was quite sincere: she did wonder how, having painted a thing like that, he could, quite calmly, propose to give it away. Standing there in the centre of Helena's mauve drawing-room it struck a new and arresting note, which Jerome's heavy oils of dead and gone Courtneys were powerless to smother. It brought with it a wonderful, not quite canny, sense of atmosphere. You did not need to know anything at all about art or the criteria of art to know that: it gripped you at once by the throat. This little sketch lived because the artist had not only seen, he had felt. You were immediately conscious of that, even if you didn't know Haworth and had no feeling for the Brontës. The delicate glow in the west, the pale moon straggling wanly up the sky and the faint silver-grey mist hovering like a wraith over the naked village struck for Helena at once a definite note of tragedy. Only a lover of the Brontës, she felt, could have got quite that note in quite that way. The little sketch, like Haworth itself, was saturated with the Brontës and their drama. Even in that comfortable mauve drawing-room it was tragedy, palpitating and passionate, that looked out at you from the pictured scene of it. It looked out now at Helena.

"But I feel we ought not to take it . . . that some day you may be sorry you gave it away."

Hilary was not looking at his drawing. His eyes had been on Helena's burnished head, bending, as if in humility, before the work of his hands. It was her head which fascinated him — that and the regal way she carried it. He got up and moved to her side. They stood there together, their shoulders almost touching, and for a little neither spoke. It was strange, Helena used afterwards to think, that it should have been at tragedy they had looked, first, together. . . .

"No," said Hilary presently, "I think I should like you to have it. If you don't, anything may happen to it. It may even

get into the hands of someone who cares nothing at all about the Brontës. There are such people, you know."

Helena did know. She smiled, a little ruefully, and Hilary wondered why he hadn't noticed before that in her smile there was just a hint of obliquity — it surprised you like that sudden, unreasonable, variable tilt of her nose. It gave you yet another reason for looking a second time at her; you wanted to think of something else to say which might make her smile again.

Side by side they moved slowly round the room, talking of the dead and gone Courtneys in their dull frames, of the men who had painted them, and of the position that was to be given to the water-colour. Yet all the time Helena was wondering why it should seem to her that this very clever young man (that was how she thought of him now) did not really want to talk to her — not, at least, about anything that mattered, about his pictures, about books or ideas. He bred in her this morning a surprising sense of self-consciousness, an odd speculative tendency that she found perplexing until there rushed upon her again a recollection of those five baffling minutes of twilight. She could scarcely bear, now, to think of them, and yet they were making for them this morning — or so it seemed to Helena — a sort of secret pact. Already there was something which they shared between them . . . something of which no one knew at all save only themselves.

Just a common flirtation! That was what Gertrude and Lucy would have said of it, she knew. And yet it hadn't seemed — it didn't seem now — in the very least common or vulgar, and Helena had certainly not meant to flirt. She had never flirted in her life: that was one of the "tricks" (feminine or not, as you like) which the Fates had denied her. Those baffling minutes were not to be explained as easily as all that: if there was any explanation at all you must dig deeply to come at it. Helena, as yet, did not dare disturb the soil. She was afraid of what she might see. The thing — whatever it was — had just happened, through no conscious volition of her own. She hadn't known, hadn't realised, till now, that it was wrong — something she ought to have tried strenuously to have prevented from happening at all. . . .

Yet here she was this morning beset by a sense of mingled

shame and fate. She felt cheapened and yet absolved. Whatever had happened — and perhaps it was very little, after all — had happened not because of but in spite of herself. But she wanted, suddenly, to know what *he* thought: wanted to know whether he, too, held her cheapened, whether with Gertrude and Lucy he could think her capable of “making eyes” across a half-dark room. A sudden spurt of courage ran through her, like the zigzag of lightning across a stormy sky. Somehow — and at once — she had to find out, had to know, for certain, what he thought of her. . . .

She turned her head and their eyes met. Frankly and freely, uncurtained by the blue of the dusk, for the first time they looked at each other.

In those few seconds there came to them both, perhaps, a brief, shuddering vision of things definitive, calamitous. For that one fraction of time the wall Hilary had been so carefully erecting was down completely between them. But what they saw they understood, as yet, scarcely at all.

Their gaze dropped asunder. But now, at least, Helena knew. Whatever it was he thought of her it was not that sordid thing she had feared. He too had absolved her. So much that one steady look had shown her.

What it had not shown her, what to-day she could not see, was the end. For this morning there was no future at all — there was only this wonderful palpitating minute that was the Present. She heard, as yet, no pæan of dawn cleaving the darkness; she heard nothing whatever save the beating of her own insurgent heart.

CHAPTER FOUR

1

ABOUT the lunch that followed Helena remembered nothing at all save that Ursula and Dr. Wyatt talked a good deal of the cripple children they domiciled over at the Red House at Haxby Wyke (which at any other time Helena might have found of interest but which to-day didn't matter), and that every time Hilary looked at her he glanced away again hurriedly. Once, listening to something Ursula was saying to Jerome, it struck her as ridiculous that Ursula Wyatt should have no children of her own while only with difficulty was Lucy to be persuaded from having a baby every year. For Ursula's energy and her manner were tremendously, vitally, maternal: you could not imagine that she would ever be appalled or dismayed by the personality of a child. She existed as a perpetual contradiction of that terribly scientific statement that there is no such thing as a "born mother."

To that one coherent thought was added, presently, another — the thought that, for all the meal moved with the stately grace of a dignified ritual, they did seem rather to have overdone it. Helena began to feel ashamed of the dishes as they appeared; once, when Hilary passed a course, she flushed and, a little awkwardly, passed it too. Angela Richardson-Courtney in that old turreted house of hers might have lunches like this she chose — just as an earl may drink his tea out of his saucer if he likes because no one will think he does it because he doesn't know any better. But in this brand-new house, destitute of the Courtney tradition (or of any tradition at all, for that matter), this lunch did seem to hint at vulgarity. Rather as if, Helena thought, they were spelling it with a capital "L."

For the rest, all this food and drink and this sparkling ever-rolling ball of conversation, was only something which got most tremendously in the way of the things she was trying to

think out. For it seemed to-day as if for that "something big" she had not waited long enough — or that the "something" had not been so very big, after all. Here at the end of six weeks that was how she thought of her marriage — as a not very big thing, after all. Perhaps for Jerome it was different. Jerome had so much else: it seemed as if she herself had merely got wedged into a prominent place among other things equally necessary to him . . . his career and his business interests. Jerome had made a sandwich of love. . . .

Five minutes in a flame-flecked twilit room, one brief eloquent look across a Jacobean drawing-room and life — if it had ever been simple — was simple no longer. Its new note of complexity was disturbing because Helena had not heard it before, and there was no knowing what disharmonies it might engender. It was like those wonderful chords in Sibelius — hideous if you got them wrong. Anyway, here she was again, waiting, all her being poised; and stabbed every now and then by a point of wonderment as to how *she* had come to get into "all this." And "all this" at the moment was extraordinarily exciting and extraordinarily chaotic.

It was chaotic, too, for Hilary, but (since he was a more practised hand at the social virtues than Helena) you would never have guessed it, because the more he talked the less risk he ran of encountering that disturbing crooked smile of Helena's or of seeing the colour come and go in her cheeks, most tantalisingly. But when she spoke her rather scornful young voice reached him as from a distance, giving to him, none the less, a curiously definite sense of unity, creating between them bonds of perfect harmony. And once, when (for all his efforts) their eyes met, it was as if across that stately dilatory luncheon they had extended sudden hands of complete and sympathetic understanding; as if, to Hilary, there had been vouchsafed a manifest ratification of that slow, lingering smile of hers. . . .

2

Later, over their coffee, they arranged a return visit to the Red House for the Friday of the following week. Hilary made a note of the date for Ursula, and Helena saw that he made it in shorthand, and on the edge of his cuff. Their hands met, as

they said good-bye: their eyes scarcely at all. And no word at all about Friday — not half a word, though that, Helena thought, was what she was going to live for.

When they had gone she came in and stood for a minute inside the morning-room, looking across to the empty chair by the window. Already the dusk had fallen. The fire had been allowed to go out: there was to-day no impish blue flame to play tricks . . . and no one to play them with. Grey ashes littered the green tiles of the fireplace. The windows were wide open and the white curtains flapped briskly in the breeze, just as they had done two days ago. But this time she did not rescue them. She stood there in the doorway, looking a little wistfully at the cold, empty room, then with a slight shiver she turned and went out, closing the door very softly after her. Yet it was not of things past, things dead and cold, that she thought so much as of things present and to come. A sense of days predestinate was upon her. . . .

Jerome, crossing the hall, suggested a walk across the moor. He wanted, she could see, to do something with his unusually idle afternoon, and she knew he had suggested the thing most likely to appeal to her. But she shook her head.

“Do you mind if I don’t?” she asked.

“Tired?”

“Yes — just a little.”

That wasn’t true. She wasn’t in the least tired. She was only unbearably conscious of a mutinous desire to get away somewhere alone, to think. . . .

“All right,” said Jerome, “I’ll put on a pipe.”

She saw him vanish into the little room he called his study, and as she went upstairs she wondered why, for just one second, she should feel sorry for him.

3

She was to feel that same little thrill of pity once or twice again, as very slowly the next few days passed by. Outwardly calm and still, to all appearances more than usually self-possessed and deliberative, she was yet devoured by that odd sense of excitement that had surged over her as she had stood gazing at a badly buckled bicycle beneath the green porch of the

door. In some strange fashion all ordinary life seemed suspended — caught up as if by a charm. The note of high romance had come to her at last, had left her a little breathless, on tiptoe of expectancy. It transmuted now everything she looked on, everything she thought, every emotion that swayed her. Like a sycamore in the wind her spirit bent before it, under the resolute compulsion of this new bewildering sense of an overmastering, indomitable fate. Her fine sense of honour, of loyalty and respect, went down before it like a sapling in a gale. Something deep stirred within her at the recollection of a pale tense face in the murky twilight, at the memory of a musical voice trailing softly across the dusk to her. . . . She lived, for those few days, a charmed life, in which nothing mean or paltry could touch her. Romance had drawn a magic circle about her and within it she moved a free and radiant being.

Even that queer little sense of pity just came and was gone — an arrow glancing lightly upon her enchanted armour, and dropping harmlessly. She was sorry and she was tender — unusually, adorably tender. She was too happy to hurt; too happy even to *be* hurt. Her pity and her sorrow for Jerome came from this — that he had not been able to make her feel as she felt now — disembodied, bewitched; because for him nothing profound had ever stirred within her, had never once raised its head and looked in at the windows of her soul. No emotion she had ever felt for him had left her like this — glowing, uplifted: she had retained always her natural analytical faculty and had used it mercilessly, as a surgeon uses a knife. It had dissected, examined, dissected, without cessation: her feeling for Jerome was not feeling at all, but thought. He stimulated not her emotions but only the intellectual machinery that controlled the operations of that deadly knife. And now, for the present, she wasn't thinking in the very least; she was giving herself up completely to this new and delectable sensation which she did not stay to analyse. That would come later. At present she could only feel: thought drowsed contentedly in the sun.

To Jerome her new tenderness and sweetness were things of unmitigated delight. They argued, for him, that the love he craved from her — the gift he wanted most of life — would

one day shortly be his. He did not know — how should he? — that when her eyes rested upon him in that tender, fugitive way, she was thinking of an impudent moon trailing up a grey-black sky, that watched her as she flung the gleaming banner of her smile across the heaving blue of the dusk; that once again there rose before her, as it had done across the misty tragedy of the Brontë sketch, a brief shrouded vision of the ultimate destiny of things. But because these things were hidden from him Jerome was happy — life for him these days became just one extremely pleasant thing after another, each definitely tinged with an agreeable certainty. But for Helena it was just a big unexplored world, hung with a great orange moon, that she had stumbled upon out of the mist. It was so new and strange and unexpected that it baffled even while it enticed. . . .

Was this love? If so, it was love for the first time . . . Helena had not known that anything could be so wonderful.

4

The morning of the Friday for which she had been living dawned chilly after a night of rain, and Jerome ordered the closed car and told Fownes to drive. (Fownes, according to Jerome, was the best man with a licence on the road, which appeared to mean that Fownes had exceeded the speed limit the maximum number of times with the minimum number of convictions. He was a magnificent person with an uncanny facility in dodging police traps and a strenuous objection to the owner of a motor-car using it or wanting it used as if it were a steam-roller.) The closed car and the services of Fownes were decided upon not on account of the weather but because these days Jerome liked to look at Helena instead of at the long, muddy Yorkshire roads, liked to watch her eyes darken with the dreams he did not suspect, and her mouth quiver, when she smiled, in a way that was new and infinitely tender and appealing.

She was very quiet on the journey to Haxby Wyke; she sat looking out across the moor as though she had never seen it before. Jerome wondered if she remembered that it was across this same road they had come that morning nearly two months ago, after that ceremony in the Registry Office at Rat-

tenby. He wanted to ask her, but that was precisely the sort of thing Jerome could never bring himself to say. His deepest feelings — where Helena was concerned — were almost always inarticulate. There were some things you couldn't say without feeling a fool. This was one of them. They sat there quite silent as the great moor unfolded itself and the sweeping clouds rolled down to meet it. The wind, like organ music played on the diapason stop, rushed on towards them; it echoed fiercely among the leafless trees above them and pursued them with passionate entreaty. Fitful sunlight rolled over the black aspect of the moor as the pearl-grey clouds rolled over the sky — a sad transitory smile on the face of winter.

This county of hers moved Helena to deep silences. She knew no other and would not have compared it if she had, for it had a beauty — wild and untamable — of its own, that had got into her blood. Just to look at it was at times an ecstasy of delight. Gertrude had been scornful of that profundity of feeling Helena had for the moors. Away there in her elegant Wimbledon villa, she did not miss them. When she wanted to walk — and it wasn't very often, for why walk when you had a motor-car? — there was always the Common. Helena was grateful to Wimbledon Common, because on those occasions when she stayed with Gertrude it had somewhat consoled her for London's intolerable lack of background. On the Common a wind blew always; it had soft springy turf, and in the summer and autumn the heather grew there in clumps. It was true the Urban District Council forbade you to pick it, but the main thing was that it grew. You could see it, walk on it, lie down on it with a book. . . . That had amused Gertrude — that lying down on Wimbledon Common with a book. Gertrude had never felt the need to walk or run or lie on a moor. A moor, to her, represented country — and that Gertrude hated. Helena had heard her grumble once because the Common cost money: it made the rates so heavy. The moors you didn't have to pay for. Gertrude granted them that much superiority over the Common at Wimbledon. . . .

Presently the car slowed down over a difficult piece of road and Helena began to put on her gloves. Her face was grave; but there was about her an ardent eager look that Jerome, watching, found irresistible. Suddenly he put his arm round

her and pulled her roughly up against him. For a second she lay rigid in his arms, then her body relaxed — her lips parted as his met them. She shut her eyes as he kissed her.

Afterwards for just a second she wondered whether she hated him because he had kissed her, or because he exhaled the scent of stale tobacco. She sat up, straightening her hat. And presently she smiled — a sweet fugitive smile that made Jerome want to kiss her again.

“We’re nearly there,” she said.

Her tone was an even level: you would never have guessed the leaping fury of excitement which was going on down there beneath all that calm and quiet. Jerome didn’t guess it, either. He lit for himself another cigarette, with the air of a man for whom life moves serenely in pleasant places.

Helena sat a little forward in her seat, watching the red roofs of Haxby Wyke coming rapidly into sight. A sudden fleeting shaft of sunlight lit them up and made them beautiful. The bare shoulder of Haffington Ridge towered black above them and the white coursing clouds rolled down to meet them. Jerome looked at his watch and crowed with delight because the magnificent Fownes had done the journey in record time. The car stopped and they stepped out. As Jerome lifted for her the latch of the gate Helena heard him congratulating Fownes on his achievement. She went on up the path to the house.

“My dear, how *very* charming you look.”

Ursula, rustling up to the door, drew her inside and kissed her. Helena *did* look charming. Excitement had deepened her colour, her eyes were bright, and their blue had intensified as it often did, till they looked black. The wind, through the open window of Jerome’s car, and under the spur of Fownes’s record driving, had beaten out her hair in short, gold-brown tendrils round her face. There was a glow about her — her skin looked translucent, as if, this morning, a warm flame had been kindled somewhere just behind it.

She stood there beside Ursula as Jerome came up and began to speak of their journey. She moved a little away from the big fire, for all the blood in her body was rushing to her face, and she was hot.

Ursula was speaking.

“I am so sorry . . . Mr. Sargent asked me to make you his

apologies that he will not be here to meet you. He went back to town quite early yesterday morning."

As though you'd thrown a hood over it that bright glow went out suddenly from Helena's face. She said nothing.

Jerome, getting out of his coat, spoke for them both.

"That commission he was telling me about, I expect. . . ."

A little ghost of hope showed faintly in Helena's eyes. The commission would explain matters . . . put things right. But Ursula, hideously truthful, did not allow her even that much comfort.

"No, I don't think he had heard anything in regard to that. It was, I'm afraid, rather a caprice. He's like that . . . you never know. He comes when he likes, often very unexpectedly, and he goes in just the same way."

"Oh — the artistic temperament!" Jerome was suitably understanding. Ursula was very grateful to him: she had really, this time, been rather annoyed with Hilary, too annoyed to make the usual polite excuses. Even her threat of the truth had been unavailing. She had never known him more determined.

"Yes . . . he has rather a big streak, I'm afraid . . . it's a bit difficult, sometimes, with other people."

Helena moved towards the fire, as if suddenly she had become cold.

5

The high wind had dropped. The moor, as they rode home, was very still. The outlines of the surrounding country were blurred by a clinging diaphanous mist: you could not any longer see the black shoulder of Haffington Ridge away there over the top of the red roofs of the village. Night, silent and immense, was creeping up on the heels of twilight. Long dark shadows strode, brooding, over the moor, and through the mist of sapphire a white moon showed wanly. Already on the face of the moor there was the hint of mystery and terror which comes with the dark.

Helena sat very still. She was tired: tired to death. In mind and body she was suffering a hideous reaction from that unreal, impossible, immediate past. No pulse of excitement beat in her now; the spring had been wound too tight, had

snapped. She had taken off her hat with its gorgeous feather, and it rested now on her lap, her hands crossed idly beneath it. Her face, as she leant back in her corner, was arrestingly white. The night air came in at the window, and with a fierce gesture swept her hair back from her white forehead. Every now and then it blew across her face and into her eyes but she did not raise her hand to brush it away. She looked as though she were made of stone — white stone, and terribly cold. But when she spoke her voice was very soft and gentle, her manner inexpressibly tender. Jerome, adoring these things, failed entirely to catch the new note — slight but unmistakable — which had crept into them. Already, if Jerome had but eyes to see, there was in her attitude a hint of mingled pity and remorse — remorse because of herself, and pity for him — because, in thought at least, she had so soon and so easily betrayed him.

Like snow on the face of the desert her world of enchantment had vanished suddenly and utterly: that white ghost hung aloft in the mist was all that was left now of its pendent orange moon. Motionless, she sat there staring at it, until presently the sapphire deepened and shut even that out.

CHAPTER FIVE

1

AFTER a week of brooding Helena Courtney faced the truth about that broken illusion of hers — realised with a sort of sick desperation that it was one of the things which had speedily to be forgotten, or if that were impossible, that she must cease to remember that she had not forgotten. Her dream and her awakening were thus far sacred — that no one knew of them but herself.

Jerome, manlike, attributed her moods and her silences to the fact that she had no child. It never occurred to him to look deeper, or to imagine there might be anything deeper; he had forgotten, if indeed he had ever known, that he had married a clever woman. It wasn't cleverness he looked for primarily in a woman — certainly not in the woman he had made his wife. Of that one bitter-sweet week of dreaming he knew nothing; nor of the pale sanctity with which for evermore it must tinge life for Helena. He did not guess that there were times even now when a poignant memory of that episode floated down to her, redolent of rue and rosemary — of all that you lay tenderly across the sweet things of life that have died. It seemed sometimes as if Love, though now he shrouded his face, had not done with her yet — that still he held for her wonderful things in store. She had a wild, insane vision, pitifully brief, of love that made the crooked paths straight, that demanded nothing, that understood; and of a companionship that completed life, that was in itself a recognition of her full human worth. For Helena still believed — rather arrogantly, perhaps — in love. That she had missed it proved nothing. To the other women who came and sat in her big mauve drawing-room she was at all times an enigma. They knew no more of her than she chose to reveal — and that was not much. But they served to Helena as a whetting-stone against which she

sharpened continually that natural analytical faculty of hers, resolving those "first Wednesdays" into a perpetual effort to get at their souls, to tear down the conventional mask with which they had grown accustomed to hide their real thoughts and emotions. They let her see sometimes that in not having a child she had missed something, and she grew occasionally impatient with this insistence, male and female (or was it only female because it was in the first place male?) upon the strength and force of the maternal sense in women. It was a virtue which, if they had not, they all hastened to assume. Men liked women to like children, so when women didn't they pretended they did. "You *have* to have children, my dear," they said to her, "if you want to keep your husband's affection!"

Insensibly a sort of dull resentment grew up within Helena Courtney. She had never had a chance: had never stood alone and faced life, braced for battle. She had always been dependent upon somebody else—to put it truthfully, upon some man. And nothing, somehow, made amends for that. Looking back she saw that there had never really been anything else at all on her horizon save marriage. That she could have done other things didn't matter. "Oh, you're a girl, you'll get married." It was just so her mother and father between them had disposed of her "career," and her lack of it, she saw now, had been Jerome's opportunity. She was suddenly aware that she would never have married him had she been free, with a profession in her hands that could earn for her independence and a livelihood. Some women married for love—and that, perhaps, was different. But she hadn't. Respect and liking were not enough. She was sure at least of that. So much that one rapturous incident had taught her. Its recollection these days complicated the issue. For, if once you had felt like that, you didn't easily take second best. And that, she was coming to believe, was what most women did. They liked the things they were supposed to like. They were so ill-trained they probably wouldn't have known, left to themselves, what they really did want. They followed, the great bulk of them, the line of least resistance.

If this theory which ruled the world were true, Helena decided that she ought now to be completely obsessed with the

idea of thwarted motherhood. And she wasn't. The maternal instinct, if in her it existed at all, slept still. What, at this time, she wanted above all things else was to be regarded primarily as a human being — as a creature possessing an individuality of her own, as undeniable as that of a man — utterly apart from that of husband or child. It was Jerome's implied refusal to recognise this which irked her continually. He thought of her just as everyone else had always done, simply and solely as a woman. She didn't exist, except as a wife and potential mother, and it seemed to Helena that there was rather more of her, somehow, than that. It was a conviction which rose steadily to an intense overwhelming passion of belief. . . .

2

What exactly it was that had induced her one day to look at the advertisement columns of the *Post* or what had impelled her to answer Emanuel Harvey's shorthand announcement she did not know. Caprice, impulse, it might well have been either, but more than all else, the art of writing shorthand according to Pitman had suddenly presented itself as just one more thing to do — an opportunity for study and concentration, a subject with which (hideous phrase!) to "kill time." She began in much the same spirit in which she had begun of late to practice Chopin and Beethoven, because it required effort — because it didn't, on the face of it, look easy. She had discovered that the thing which you did too easily didn't help. What she wanted just then was to drudge with her brain, as she had drudged with her fingers on the white keys of her Bechstein. . . .

Emanuel Harvey's fees, as it happened, were not high, and had been paid quite easily out of her very generous dress allowance. And though she did not take Jerome into her confidence, at least, there, at the first, she had no ulterior motive in mind. Perhaps she knew that Jerome would have been amused. That was another queer thing — they laughed, nearly always, she and Jerome, at different things. The occurrence that was tragic to Helena was not infrequently comic to Jerome, and when she didn't laugh he was apt to say, "Where's your sense of humour, my dear?" It was extraordinary how bit-

terly she could resent that phrase! There were things in life at which you simply dare not laugh. And men said "Where's your sense of humour?" or "Do have a sense of proportion." Hateful phrase that Helena came to loathe!

It was later, when she went down to Wimbledon to stay with Gertrude and Edgar, that the ulterior motive crept up and looked at her out of shy, glad eyes. . . . It happened that Edgar one evening had booked seats at a theatre where, amongst other things, they played Barrie's *Twelve Pound Look*, and this little play she had not known before gripped hold of her, helped her to discern clearly that, to be free and independent, you must have money — enough money to keep you. If you didn't happen to possess it you had to earn it, in some such way as the girl in the play earned it — if you couldn't think of a better.

For the first time in her life Helena felt as that spiteful old woman, her grandmother, had intended her to feel when she cut her out of her will. The money now would have been so useful. The thought went through Helena's mind that if grandmamma Burke only knew what she was thinking she would surely turn in her grave for joy.

When she got back to Yorkshire she began to save until she had just fifty pounds locked away in a drawer. There were times when she felt like a miser. Other times, too, when she wondered if, ever, she would have the courage to run away. . . .

3

But it never came to that because, suddenly, Opportunity stood on her doorstep, bowing her out. . . . That was how she put it to herself: what really happened was that business suddenly called Jerome away to New York and that Helena had begged to be allowed to stay behind. Jerome had assumed, of course, that she would accompany him, because, in his simple philosophy, wives did. Besides, he thought the idea of travel would have appealed to her. It might have done, of course, but for these other ideas crowding it out.

It took her two whole days in which to work up her courage, in which to clothe the scheme she had in mind decently in words; and when she had done her best with it, it remained

still most hideously and indecently naked. Nevertheless, on that third morning she had managed to get it out.

It happened, of course, that Jerome was late that morning for breakfast, so that instead of hurling her bomb and getting it over, she had sat behind her silver coffee-pot and hoped things wouldn't get cold — her courage among them. (That was her business in life — seeing that things didn't get cold.)

Long afterwards she remembered that last morning in September, and the bright sunshine and sting in the air that had come with it. In almost equal measure they had filtered into Helena through the flung-back window. The room smelled of autumn — the pungent herbaceous perfume of chrysanthemums and of all the other flowers that herald the approach of winter. From where she sat Helena could see the quiet leaf-strewn garden, beyond it the purple moor, and beyond that again the morning mist on Haffington Ridge. Against the blue of the sky the trees, tall and motionless, showed faint russet and gold. Above them the white clouds drifted and drifted. . . . It was so still you could hear the coloured leaves dropping among their already-fallen fellows, or a horse-chestnut hurtling headlong to the ground. . . .

Presently the door had opened and Jerome appeared.

"Sorry," he said, and kissed her, as he had kissed her regularly every morning of the past eleven months. "Your good habits seem to react on me." Her "good habit" of early rising, he meant, remembering that vague sense he had had of her two hours ago moving softly about their common room. Jerome did not rise early. He liked his world not only garrisoned and swept before his descent upon it but thoroughly aired as well.

Afterwards, she remembered how he looked as he lifted the cover and inspected the bacon. And, too, she remembered what he had said, though it was nothing that mattered. "Been out?"

"Yes, as far as Elmtondale."

"Fresh, wasn't it?"

"It was, rather. I hope nothing's cold" (a variation, this, on the usual phrase, "I'm afraid the bacon isn't very hot.") She poured out coffee, punctiliously dropping three lumps of sugar into Jerome's cup because Jerome always knew if you

only put two. (Another of her "missions" in life — remembering how many lumps of sugar Jerome liked in his coffee, and that he took none in his tea!) He tossed over now a dull post, served out the excellently grilled bacon, hunched up his shoulders at the wide-flung window, and the meal began.

Nothing was cold, it seemed, but Helena's courage — that had coagulated. It lay like a solid thing there in the pit of her stomach and spoiled her appetite. A century seemed to pass before she heard herself say:

"Jerome . . . do you mind very much . . . if I don't come to America?"

She saw, before the words were out, that he had misunderstood — that he supposed her to have some excellent (woman's) reason for not wanting just then to leave home.

"No . . . not that," she said quickly, and spurred on her drooping courage. Above all things she did not, then, want to remember that Jerome longed for a son. . . .

4

So, gradually, bit by bit, she got the truth out, contrived to fling a few rags of clothing upon the stark figure of her astounding proposition. Out came the facts — the shorthand "facts" of Emanuel Harvey's postal tuition, a passionate insistence on the lack of that ulterior motive, and that astounding proposition of hers — to go up to London to one of the commercial schools there and finish her training whilst Jerome was in America . . .

Jerome went through a week of argument, entreaty and despair. He went to see Emanuel Harvey at his Halifax school and discovered (the idiocy of it!) that Helena possessed the "makings of an unusually good phonographer." He would have been better pleased to have heard Emanuel Harvey pronounce his wife a stenographic idiot. Once or twice his mind played round the idea of coercion. Vague thoughts came to him, floating chaotically about a word he had never dreamed of before in connection with Helena, but, fortunately or unfortunately, he could well imagine the scorn on Helena's face if he tried that line — and he wouldn't like Helena to despise him. But at the back of his mind he always hoped — feebly,

childishly — that if he left it alone this wild cat scheme (to the end he called it that) would peter out. . . . But it did nothing of the sort, and a week later Helena was installed in a boarding house in Bloomsbury, had entered her name on the register of Gwynne's Commercial College in Finsbury Pavement and Jerome was on his way to America.

5

However it was with Jerome, Helena found only one thing wrong with her boarding-house — it was much too comfortable. Jerome, during that one week he had spent there with her, had taken the largest available bedroom and had wondered why it seemed to amuse her. But it reminded her, that great bed, of the Dulac drawing (at least she thought it was by Dulac!) of the fairy princess tossing wearily on the mountain of her twenty mattresses and twenty eiderdowns, so very much a princess that she could feel the pea beneath them all. But if Jerome had read Andersen it was so long ago he had forgotten all about it, and, entirely missing the joke, he had only insisted sternly that she couldn't live in a bedroom and must have a sitting-room.

"But surely there's a drawing-room," Helena had begun.

"Oh that — a communal affair."

"But, Jerome, I don't want special favours. A business girl, I'm sure, couldn't afford a private sitting-room."

"You aren't a business girl," Jerome had said.

"Not yet," Helena agreed. (For by this time it had come to that. Not only the business school but the business office at the end of it!)

Mrs. Bryan, the proprietress of Cowdray House, had produced a suitable sitting-room with the air of a conjurer producing rabbits from a hat, and Helena had arrived at the conclusion that Mrs. Bryan was not entirely unaffected by the magnificent Fownes who had arrived each morning with the grey car, and "shown them London." All things considered, she was not sorry when she said good-bye to Jerome at the end of the week. She was like that to the end — quite hard and untouched by any sense of the imminence of farewell — even when Jerome on Euston Station looked at her out of hungry

eyes, and, with a knife turning and twisting in his heart, implored her to give him another kiss. The things she had thought of there on that dusty station, the things she had seen and heard, were queer, happy, impersonal things — porters passionately entreating passengers to take their seats: the haste and clumsiness of the people who kissed and were kissed (so many kisses, and with an amusing unanimity about them, as though the porter's stentorian voice had wound up some hidden machinery, compelling them to this queer osculatory exhibition); and Fownes strolling past, magnificent in great coat, touching his hat to Jerome who did not see him, and to Helena who did. She had looked after him with her faint crooked smile and had reflected that for just six months she might relax. For just so long at least there would be no Fownes to "live up to."

But Jerome saw nothing and nobody save Helena standing there with her sweet oblique smile — the Helena all the world might know. And he saw that she wasn't going to miss him: that his failure was worse than he had known — even as bad as all that. None of the keys he had tried had fitted. The inner self he wanted to get at was locked away from him still, and his stock of keys had run out. Something within him felt jagged and torn. One queer detached part of him was angry; resenting this thing that had happened to him, this avalanche of feeling that had descended upon him. He did not want to suffer. He wanted happiness. Happiness and Helena; but Helena anyway — the real Helena, the strange essential woman hidden away there out of his reach.

Just one of the many points of interest a generous world had given him — so Helena had said of Jerome and his affection for her. And she really did believe it. For so clever a girl she could be at times incredibly stupid where this man she had married was concerned. It was many months before she began to realise that her calculations had gone astray — that, somewhere, her neatly worked sum was "out."

6

Cowdray House was full, Helena discovered, of a good many people who not only did not interest her but did not seem to

interest each other, and one nice boy who interested everybody. His name was Baxter — James Hallford Baxter, though nobody remembered that because “Jimmy” was so much more suitable and human. And Jimmy, as it happened, had fallen head over heels in love with Helena on that very first evening when she and Jerome had burst like an unbelievable vision into the dull respectability of Mrs. Bryan’s dining-room. But as Jimmy was only just twenty-one this didn’t matter because it gave him plenty of time in which to get over it. Just at present, however, Jimmy didn’t want to “get over it”; he was content just to sit opposite Helena at dinner and he contrived to look as though he sat in heaven. He handed her what she wanted at table, before she wanted it, and flew, a galvanised Mercury, to open doors for her. After a while he manœuvred for a more intimate seat in heaven: sat not opposite Helena but at her side and talked to her quite brightly of the drama. Later he suggested that the drama was a subject they might study together: he was in need, he told her, of an occasional pleasant evening. Life was so “samey.” (Really, life did seem to bore Jimmy: he had so much money and so much leisure, far more of both than was good for him, because “reading for the Bar,” if you have no more enthusiasm for it than Jimmy had, takes up surprisingly little of either.)

But Helena was not in town for the purpose of providing James Hallford Baxter with “pleasant evenings,” and after a little Jimmy gave it up. That is to say, although he never ceased to ask his question he did cease to expect Helena to say “yes.” His invitation became just part of the simple ritual of Mrs. Bryan’s quite excellent seven o’clock dinner.

At Gwynne’s Commercial School in the City was a rigid discipline that relaxed scarcely oftener than the moon is blue, for to Henry Herbert Gwynne, its Principal, a school remained a school whether you were sixteen or sixty. He said so continually. He also said that if you wanted to “slack” you didn’t (if you were wise) come to Gwynne’s for the purpose. Henry Herbert Gwynne (“H.H.” as any day below stairs you might hear impudent Sixteen, partly Jewish and partly Christian, refer to him) was an Irishman who hid a native dislike of women under a grudging appreciation of their business abilities. Now nearing his forty-fifth birthday, he could re-

member the days when a woman in an office was a rarity, but even then he had cherished a conviction that the day was coming when she would be nothing of the sort. And to this intuition Gwynne's Commercial College owed its existence. Like most similar institutions (and it flourished) it was run on a system of "results"; you realised that as soon as you entered the classrooms, even if you had missed it as you turned over the pages of the illustrated prospectus! From the first day at Gwynne's you ceased to be an individual at all; you became the living embodiment of a potential result!

Mr. Gwynne accepted Helena with alacrity because of her "matric.," because of her obvious enthusiasm and because of the really good "grounding" Emanuel Harvey had given her. And Helena accepted Mr. Gwynne — partly because she had, on the whole, very little to do with him, and partly because when she did she found him amusing. Irritable men she had met, but the man who flew into so bad a rage that he became lyrical in his abuse of you, was a new type to her. Whilst Sixteen, its insolence temporarily banished, paled and cowered beneath the trenchant emphasis of an Irish brogue lashing its stupidity and ignorance, Helena sat still and wondered why it should be the Christian girls it reduced to tears whilst Miss Levy upheld Miss Abrahams untiringly in a praiseworthy effort to show a united front to the worst onslaught of the Irish temperament.

The only other male member of the staff with whom Helena came into contact was a fair, ruddy-faced man from Angela's county who despised the cockney trick of ignoring the letter "r," and who loved shorthand almost as much as journalism (which he practised in his spare time, what there was of it. There couldn't, Helena felt, be much). Mr. Calderson admired Helena because she recognised an "r" when she saw one, because she knew the meaning of words and could read the shorthand she wrote (a rare accomplishment that) and never wrote nonsense when she couldn't (a still rarer accomplishment). Helena found his jokes rather tiresome, but rather imagined shorthand jokes were like that, because she once came across another member of the staff who made them too, and his were just the same. But Helena liked Mr. Calderson because he was enthusiastic and honest and pains-

taking, and if he did get irritable, at least it was not with her.

Next door, in the typewriting room, was a little dark lady (Miss Rollings by name) who controlled fifty typewriters (and the young women who used them); who reduced typewriting to a fine art and had written several "manuals" about it. At Christmas she sent Helena a greeting card with a railway train for decoration, all of which (steam and all) had been produced by means of the typewriter. It was a worrying sort of card to get for Christmas, because you had continually to go back to it to try to find out how it was done, and "what" had been used for "what."

But it wasn't only discipline and "results" and conscientious tuition that Helena found at Gwynne's, but Evey Frampton. And Evey was twenty-one and dark, with vivid colouring that made her look like a Cardamine butterfly or some gorgeous tropical flower. Evey loved shorthand and books and plays: and fresh air, the physical exhilaration of walking, and cats and dogs (dogs rather less than cats because they *were* a little slavish, even the nicest of them. You couldn't deny it). Most things and many people interested Evey, but not scenery or relatives or musical comedies or classical concerts. Evey fished for her taboos with a wide net.

But for Helena there was something else about Evey. It wasn't only a similarity in impulse and outlook, nor that they were both rebels, "candidates for truth," but that Evey had succeeded in doing what Helena had failed to do. For two years Evey had been engaged to be married and just one week before the date announced for the ceremony she had broken it off, not because there was "anything the matter with Claude," but only that he was "the wrong man," which was reason enough.

"You see," Evey said to Helena, "I was suddenly quite certain that respect and admiration weren't sufficient. They're not, for marriage, are they?"

"They're not," Helena said, "once you feel like that about them. . . ."

7

Evey agreed with Helena, too, about the middle-aged spinsters at Gwynne's. . . .

There were not very many of them and you were thankful for that, not liking to be reminded by these relics of a bad old system how very bad it was. It had given these women one outlook only — that of marriage — and missing that they had missed everything. Here, in November, nineteen-thirteen, they believed that still, for they had been taught that a woman unmarried was a woman incomplete, and however much she might pretend to be happy everyone knew she was nothing of the sort.

And they certainly weren't happy, poor dears. They envied all that was bright and youthful in that busy bustling commercial school — envied Sixteen its lightness of heart, its immunity from worries and problems, and the chances (they thought of them as chiefly matrimonial) that lay before it. These "odd women out" of an egregious system had drifted into the shorthand world as into a last forlorn hope. They came, some of them, from good homes that had disappeared with the death of the bread-winner, and their "protected" women-folk were flung, hideously unprepared, into the vortex of the money-earning world. They had tried "companioning" and "mother's helping," and some of them had essayed to run somebody's household or a shop of their own; but they came now to Gwynne's in the city because it seemed that the sun of the Pitmanites shone ever so little brighter than their own.

One and all they envied Helena the plain gold ring on her finger, and wondered why she of all people should want to learn shorthand. It was a subject which, for the most part, they learnt rather painfully. It was years since they had been to school. Since they were sixteen or seventeen their brains had remained dormant, and were not now to be spurred into quickness of movement. The points to which Sixteen jumped in a trice they arrived at by a slow laborious process, extraordinarily irritating to the Irishman at the head of affairs. What they needed was encouragement, but encouragement was hardly a commodity that went a-begging at Gwynne's — save in that form which urged you to think yourself a little stupider than you really were. Praise, except of the very faintest variety, was regarded at Gwynne's as little short of an inde-

gency. You were never recommended for having done a thing well, but only for having done it a little less ill than was expected—a policy which these “odd women out” quite definitely resented *en bloc*. For they were tired of regarding themselves as failures; so tired of it that sometimes they sought little ways—queer, left-handed little ways—of rehabilitating a bruised and battered self-esteem. That was why Miss Bennett said to Helena one day:

“You learned shorthand before you came here, didn’t you?”

As Miss Bennett said it, it was less an inquiry than an accusation. The tone of her voice dared Helena to deny it. But it would never have occurred to Helena to deny it.

“Oh yes, for a long while,” she said. “I studied at home and took lessons through the post.”

“Through the post? Did you really? Now it never occurred to me to do that.”

Helena felt that it was just the sort of thing which *wouldn’t* occur to her. But she didn’t know what to say. Miss Bennett and her circle bristled so easily, for all the world like a little group of hedgehogs. They wouldn’t let you be friends with them: resented you, somehow, *in toto*.

“I wouldn’t stay here another five minutes,” said Miss Bennett one day to someone else, “if I wore *that* on my finger, would you?”

“It may be necessary,” said someone else. “It’s one thing to get a man, my dear—quite another to keep him.”

“That costume wasn’t bought anywhere in London for eight guineas,” Miss Bennett said, “so it can’t be that.”

“And she’s staying at Cowdray House in Bloomsbury Square. I saw the address on a letter that fell out of her *Manual* yesterday. And you don’t stay at Cowdray House for five shillings a week, my dear.”

“Oh, what does it matter?” said another. “The first bell’s gone. Let’s go up. I know those two youngsters will get the seat nearest the fire, and my feet yesterday afternoon were simply perished.”

Still, as Evey said encouragingly to Helena, if there were Miss Bennett and Company there had also been Florence Nightingale. Evey was always having hopeful thoughts of that kind.

8

Helena and Evey did most things together these days — took to meeting each other for theatres, concerts (of the non-classical "variety"), walks and 'bus rides (for Helena had forgotten all about the grey car Jerome had left at a Bloomsbury garage with a lot of orders as to what was to happen when Helena wanted to use it. Because she never did). And once she went down to Streatham to tea and met Evey's father and mother, and a younger sister called Estelle, who converted the Broadwood grand in the drawing-room into an instrument that plucked out every emotion you had and piled them in a desolate heap in front of you.

"Estelle," Evey told Helena, "loves to harrow people. I just hate her playing — it's too . . . too something . . . unrestrained, p'raps that's the word. But everyone thinks it's wonderful. Only father and mother don't want to believe it. They think it would be very nice for Estelle to be a music teacher if she cares about music as much as all that. But that makes Estelle laugh — all she wants to do is to go to Leipsic to study. Mother hopes she'll fall in love and forget all about it. Poor old Estelle! And poor old father and mother, I suppose. It must be *awful* being a parent. You do seem to have the most unaccountable children, don't you?"

That was a point of view Evey's father seemed to share. He walked down to Streatham Common Station with Helena when she left, and he talked to her, as they went, with a mixture of affection and bewilderment that touched her, about his daughters.

"I can't understand," he said, "how I ever came to have two girls like that. They don't seem to belong to me at all. I *can't* understand it. Now, I know where I am with the boys."

Yes, poor dear, he would, thought Helena. He was such a correct little man, so immaculately dressed, so desperately middle-class to his very finger-tips. He was ready to play, *in excelsis*, the affectionate generous father. (He could afford to be generous: he was a silk merchant in the city, with a thriving business.) He was ready to give these girls of his whatever they wanted, and he found that one of them had never wanted anything at all but a Broadwood piano and the other

cared about nothing but a queer thing which she called her independence. Helena thought, all the way to Victoria, of that eminently correct little figure flying in pursuit of the Eternal Feminine. Of the Eternal Feminine plus something else that in one case people called "genius" and in the other "discontent." Mr. Frampton, poor little man, was equally at sea with either. And he reminded Helena quite ludicrously of Jerome. They both wanted their women-folk to be happy, and they couldn't for the life of them understand why they couldn't be. . . .

9

Evey and Helena plodded steadily away at their stenographic speed course, not altogether dissatisfied with their progress and maintaining it at a rate that was happily more or less uniform. They suffered together, and to about the same degree, the fever of shorthand enthusiasm which descends some time or other upon most carefully taught students of the Pitmanic system. They dragged shorthand into all things, learned to "think in shorthand," acquired the queer trick of making mental outlines of the advertisements that stared at them from 'bus, tube and train, and traced them, to much mystification of the travelling public, upon book or paper with an energetic forefinger. They made a simultaneous discovery that shorthand had got into modern literature — into the novels of Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett and Mr. Oliver Onions. They laughed at Mr. Wells's idea that shorthand could be written with a stylographic pen, and at Mr. Bennett's notion that "capital punishment" was a "famous grammalogue."

It really was extraordinary how adventurous and interesting life had suddenly become for Helena. The twin arts and this new surprising life of freedom had brought a deliciously poignant happiness that ran through the days like magic. Her letters to Jerome were full of it, though you would never have guessed it from the replies which he sent her. Jerome had no literary gift of expression and Helena could read just nothing between the lines. She could yet work that neat sum of hers without discovering any disturbing phenomenon in regard to the addition of two and two. Quite sanely and sensibly they seemed still to make four.

When the school closed at Christmas Helena gave herself about another month at the College in the New Year, and began to measure her commercial chances. She wrote now quite a creditable note at eighty words a minute, and even allowing a broad margin for the Christmas holidays, she counted upon a reliable speed of a hundred by the beginning of February. A hundred words a minute, Mr. Gwynne pointed out, was nothing to boast about; but he allowed it made a good jumping-board and (not without some mixing of metaphors) pointed encouragingly to the greater heights that might be reached by the ladder of evening classes and the spring examinations. Helena, buoyantly optimistic, booked herself for both and continued steadily to regard her New Year outlook. Most of the beginners, who dived intrepidly from the spring-board of one hundred words a minute, considered themselves lucky, she knew, if rewarded with a weekly salary of a pound or twenty-five shillings. But Helena, pitting twenty-three against seventeen, and with her French and the "Open Sesame" of her "matric.," courageously hoped to do a little better than that. In any case, whatever it was, she was going to live on it until Jerome came back. That seemed the one thing certain in a world of uncertainties, and it bothered her a little, therefore, when Jerome sent her twenty pounds for a Christmas present. Obviously Jerome did not take her seriously yet. Perhaps, in that way, he never would. But Helena disposed of his cheque as she had disposed of those others, signed and blank, that he had left with her. She locked it away out of sight and presently she contrived to forget all about it.

An unlimited supply of money belonged, as she frequently took occasion to remind herself, to that one extremely prosperous year of her existence, and that already had slipped a little into the background. Even as early as this, any other life than the present one of effort and industry had about it more than a suspicion of unreality. Only the moors remained real, tugging at her heart.

That was why at Christmas she accepted Gertrude's invitation to go down to Wimbledon. A common wasn't a moor but

it was a good deal. For all that, the visit was not a success, not only because her brother Ted was there with some new words in his vocabulary, like "peach" and "ripper," which Helena did not care about, but because a new unfamiliar atmosphere of politics had descended upon "The Laurels." Edgar, it transpired, had been asked to stand as the Tory candidate for East Rokesby when that seat fell vacant at the end of May, and for some reason or other he seemed to think that if he accepted (and you could see he meant to accept) it would be a splendid idea if Helena took up her abode at "The Laurels" and turned her excellent shorthand to his account. Helena found both Edgar and his idea a trifle wearisome, because nothing would have induced her to say "yes," and Edgar was essentially the tiresome sort of man who goes through life believing that a woman really means "yes" when she says "no." Helena had her own reasons for refusing: her dislike of Edgar's politics, what she knew of them, for one thing, and her recollection that only the day before Edgar had made himself supremely ridiculous with a piece of mistletoe. Edgar was still very much the same person who had tried, all those years ago, to kiss her on the dark turn of the stairs. . . .

So disdaining his suggestion that she should keep her "shorthand in the family," Helena went back to her commercial school with a new burst of enthusiasm that was responsible for the zeal with which, on the first day of the new term, she ratified her decision to enter for the spring examinations and arranged to attend two evening classes a week. She was happier, so she thought, than she had ever been in her life before. And then, on that "first" afternoon, walking down with Evey to her tram on the Embankment, something happened. . . .

The immense surprise of it caught at her breath like an east wind. Her slow, comfortable stride stopped with a little jerk, and then with a tremendous effort went on again. Evey had noticed nothing, and if she had followed Helena's glance she would have seen only a young man standing on a refuge in the center of the road awaiting, not too patiently, the pleasure of an uncertain tramcar. But Helena's glance—a thing utterly careless, alighting by the purest accident where it did—had already seen a good deal more than that. She could

have told you that the young man was tall and slight, that he wore a dark overcoat unfastened at the neck; that there was a soft hat on his head, and a portfolio under his arm. It was extraordinary, the comprehension of that glance of hers. And the effect of it. It left her floundering in a sea of poignant emotion above which the sapphire sky and its one white star rose and fell madly together. Evey's voice reached her from an immeasurable distance — an absurd jumble of words from another world.

“It's absurd, isn't it, to pretend that Claude was heart-broken, because, you know, he's engaged again already.”

The tram moved on. For one second it obliterated the young man on the refuge; then Helena saw that he was crossing the road . . . making straight for them . . . stepping on to the kerb. Unheeding, he passed by on their left, almost touching Evey's shoulder as he did so. Beneath the glare of a street lamp, Helena caught a glimpse of a pale face, a red mouth, and long straight lashes over eager grey eyes before the night and the crowd swallowed him up. Suddenly the things Evey was saying ceased to concern her in the least. Nothing concerned her save this thing that had happened to her, and the appalling knowledge that it could hurt — like this — after all these months!

Presently Evey climbed on to her tram and Helena stood there on the pavement looking up at her, without seeing her at all. When the tram moved on she went and leaned her elbows on the parapet of the Embankment and looked down into the muddy waters of the Thames. But she saw them no more than she had seen Evey and her tram. Something had wiped out the Embankment; had flung her back precipitately into a dim, unshuttered room that looked out on to a moor. And what she saw now was a stormy sky up which there straggled a slim and impudent moon — a silver thread on a black gown. . . .

For the young man who had crossed the road was Hilary Sargent.

CHAPTER SIX

1

SHE saw him twice quite soon after that, and on neither occasion did he see her.

Afterwards, at least, she was grateful for that. On that second day, as she had walked home, Helena's proud mouth had curved in disdain of herself, so hateful was it to be reminded of that year-old blunder of hers. It took too much out of her — or out of her pride. It scarcely mattered which, since the result was the same. Yet certainly it did seem to be her pride which suffered most. She lashed herself with scorn, hating herself because a man who had not wasted a thought upon her should have this tremendous power over her. For all her modernity that was some part, at least, of the trouble with her.

But though she applied the lash, she winced under it. And for that, too, she despised herself.

Happily there were other things to think about. It was quite early in January when Mr. Gwynne sent her along to a temporary situation in the office of a solicitor, where, for the first time in her life, she came up against the anomaly of the English Divorce Laws. It was queer, she used to think, that divorce should be so difficult, but more queer than anything else was the fact that it should be assumed that it must also be disgusting.

Those three weeks for Helena were fevered with delight, with one minute of positively delirious excitement on the Friday of the first, when the office boy placed on her desk a sealed, diminutive envelope inscribed with her name. The two gold coins it contained she loved the sight of, because they gave her a new value in her own eyes. They represented the first money she had earned — that she had received for services definitely rendered. But it was not the money that mattered. Money

never did matter, much, with Helena. Even now it was only a symbol of the thing which really did matter — the justification of Helena Courtney by Helena Courtney.

There was, too, another thing. Her new work was a benevolent germ — a sort of phagocyte — feeding on the germs of her discontent and of her humiliation, so that the quiet happiness of the past weeks came back to her. The analytical knife had come to rest again.

Then at the close of her temporary engagement with Mr. Ford, the solicitor, Jerome wrote that his return must be delayed. He would not be able, he was afraid, to get away until the end of May: and he sounded annoyed. But Helena scarcely noticed that: she noticed, these days, so little about Jerome's letters, which were not particularly interesting. Neither did she think over much about Jerome himself, so that sometimes it almost looked as though the phagocyte had gone too far and had eaten up Jerome as well. . . .

2

Back there at the Commercial College a week passed as others had passed before it, save that Evey was away with influenza and Miss Bennett had struggled up at last into the Speed Room. Miss Bennett was a poor substitute for Evey, and Helena became rather tired of answering her eternal questions as to the ritual of life in an office. You could see she was scared at the thought of it, that she hungered, and would hunger for ever, after that comfortable existence in that vanished middle-class home in the suburbs.

During Evey's absence Helena interviewed several business men as prospective employers, who, one and all, declined her services, and for the same reason. None of them cared to employ a married woman. Once, Miss Bennett obtained the situation in her stead, and as they had both worked tests had quite naturally concluded that hers was better than Helena's. It was a triumph for which she had waited a long time; and in the light of her delirious happiness, any masculine prejudice, however absurd (and Mr. Gwynne seemed to think it very absurd indeed), was to Helena more than justified. It gave to Miss Bennett, for just this once, something of all that it had

snatched from her, and Helena did not begrudge her. For all that, two days later when Mr. Gwynne sent her to interview Mr. Smith, chief clerk to Wickham, Toole & Co., of London Wall, she slipped her wedding-ring into her purse and did not correct Messrs. Wickham & Toole's head clerk when he addressed her presently as "Miss Courtney." Mr. Smith engaged her. Could she start the next morning?

So at ten o'clock on the following day Helena hung up her hat and coat in the offices of Wickham, Toole & Co., Wool Merchants, of London Wall. It was a Tuesday in the third week of February, and outside there were racing clouds and a mad wind. . . .

For a fortnight Helena worked at the side of Miss Carey, the girl whose place she had been engaged to fill. Miss Carey was leaving to be married to a bank clerk, and Helena's education as to the financial status of bank clerks had been somewhat extensive. Her mother had married her father, as a branch manager, at a salary of two hundred and fifty pounds a year — and her mother, she knew, had considered herself miserably poor. Miss Carey's fiancé was not even a branch manager: most probably, Helena reflected, he had had to wait until his salary reached the matrimonial minimum — that "inexcusable outrage on the liberty of the subject," as her father called it. Miss Carey, however, was entirely philosophic about these things. She admitted that "Tom" was not well off. "But then," she said, "bank clerks never are until they're middle-aged, and if one waited for money one might wait for ever. Money isn't everything, and you're only young once, after all. An office is all very well, but you don't want to work in it all your life, do you?"

Later Helena was introduced to "Tom" as "Mr. Wright." He came to the office just before six, and he sat reading the *Star* whilst Miss Carey cleared up and locked her desk. Helena saw only a tall, plain young man, very neat and clean as to collar and tie, and with neat patches on his brightly shined boots. But then, Helena had not Miss Carey's eyes. Miss Carey contrived to see a good deal more than that — and, too, a good deal less. It was quite possible, for instance, that she didn't see the patched boots at all, or perhaps she didn't mind them. But once Helena caught the lovers looking at each

other. It was a glance which, if it knew anything at all of neatly patched boots, took them in and annihilated them. "Of course," thought Helena, "if they care like that," and she left it at that. All the same, the ellipsis was comprehensive. It took in the tiny house in North London and the drudgery of it and Marion Carey's heavily mortgaged liberty. It took in, too, the tone of her voice as she had said, "You can't have everything, can you?" And it made Helena wistful, because in the light of that one intercepted glance it did certainly seem as if Miss Carey was going to get what she wanted most.

3

It was not until her last day at the office that Marion Carey uttered her word of warning — rather with an air, Helena thought, of saying something she felt she ought to have said before.

"Steer clear of Wickham," was what she said. "He's our Managing Director — and a beast. You understand? You know the proverb? Forewarned is forearmed. There's something in it, too."

"I suppose there is," Helena said. But for just one second that confident smile which Jerome had found so annoying sent her red mouth aslant. And that meant — as Jerome could very well have told you — that she was feeling more than a match for a dozen Rupert Wickhams.

That was on the Saturday. On the Monday Helena entered upon her full inheritance in her new post and Marion Carey became Mrs. Thomas Wright. She and Helena never met again, but on the Wednesday there came for Helena at the office an inch of wedding cake in several inches of cardboard box. Helena put it in her drawer and managed somehow to forget all about it. When eventually she remembered it again she found the mice had forestalled her: they had eaten not only the inch of cake and two inches at least of the cardboard box, but part of the little three-cornered card upon which Mrs. Wright's maiden name had been neatly transixed with an arrow. Helena did not grudge the mice their meal, but they prevented her for ever from learning the exact position of that tiny house in North London.

Quite uneventfully a week passed by. Helena had become used to her work and was rapidly acquiring a steady confidence in her own ability, very gratifying to her self-esteem. As Miss Carey had been, she was the only woman on the staff, which was a small one, and consisted, besides Smith, of Smith's two subordinates and an office boy. Helena liked Smith. He lived at Ealing and cultivated a garden. He talked to her at times of this garden and, too, of his wife and baby, and she marvelled at an enthusiasm that could be so blissfully impartial. Occasionally he brought her a bunch of daffodils which he had grown "under glass," and he explained that bringing them to the office was "the wife's idea." "She would have me bring them," he said. "Thought they'd liven the office up a bit." You got the impression that Mrs. Smith's heart bled perpetually for anyone who worked in an office. But Helena was glad to have the daffodils. All day long they stood on the top of her desk in their clumsy earthenware vessel and reminded her of the spring that was coming.

Having consolidated her position — and her thirty shillings a week — in the office of Wickham & Toole, Helena made her first real declaration of independence by leaving Cowdray House and taking a bed-sitting-room in Guilford Street. Cowdray House was not, so she had decided, within the capacity of a business girl earning thirty shillings a week, and thirty shillings was what, for the time being, she proposed to live upon. Nothing would induce her to stay there at Cowdray House until Jerome returned and collected her (like a bale of goods). For she was able still — a little cold, a little, a very little arrogant — to move along the even tenor of her way, ludicrously blind and deaf to the hurricane of feeling she had aroused in Jerome: was still convinced that he had what he wanted; that she and his work shared the honours between them. Helena was young and her judgments had the touch of austerity that belongs to the judgments of youth. She had suffered as yet scarcely at all — and then only in her pride. She had not been touched — as had Jerome — to the quick. The ice which, for one brief span, had begun to melt had frozen over again. Down below the surface deep things might stir and quiver, but they did not dare to raise their heads.

One person at Cowdray House was inconsolable at her

imminent departure: and that person, of course, was Jimmy Baxter. Jimmy mattered little to Helena. Nothing stirred beneath the ice for him. Nevertheless, when he beseeched her as a "farewell treat" to let him take her to a theatre, she suddenly relented and agreed.

"You will? Good egg!" Jimmy said. "What shall it be?"

Helena looked at him and was suddenly sorry for him — not sorry enough to feel the pang of it herself, but, at any rate, sorry enough to make her choose something that would not bore Jimmy overmuch. "*A Night with the Gods*," she said, mentioning a stubborn success now in its third year. Jimmy, who had resigned himself to the Ibsen play then running, was relieved, though he could have stood even Ibsen for Helena Courtney.

Over the 'phone he secured stall seats and they got down to the London rather early. The house filled up rapidly. Five minutes before the curtain was due to rise the stalls were full save for a couple of seats three rows in front of Jimmy and Helena. Over the house there ran a buzz of pleasurable anticipation; the orchestra was playing the latest waltz, cloying and seductive, and Helena was glancing at her programme for about the fiftieth time when Jimmy suddenly exclaimed, "Hallo, I know that chap!"

Helena looked up, and her eyes fell upon the figure of a young man with a girl in blue moving to the two empty places just below. The girl Helena had not seen before, but the man — no need to look twice — the man was Hilary Sargent.

Helena was breathing deeply; but she had herself well in hand. Even had Jimmy been looking at her he would not have known she was excited. Her face was like a mask — expressionless. Jimmy wasn't clever: he would merely have thought she was bored.

"Queer chap, Sargent," he was saying, "haven't seen him for over two years: last ran across him in Paris. We were at school together. He was my senior by four or five years, but we chummed up and afterwards we met in Italy. He paints. Clever things, so they say, though I'm no judge. Atmospheric things, I'm told. Keen on the Brontë country — used to stop up there as a kid. Up your way, isn't it? Had some things

in last year's shows. Seems to be getting on. Nice-looking beggar, isn't he?"

Helena's answers were mechanical. She forced her voice to a note of indifference and wished the curtain would go up because that might stop Jimmy talking; his staccato matter-of-fact sentences were beating against her brain with all the force of a sledge-hammer.

"There was some tale, I remember, about his mother, Mary Hilary, the actress. That's her portrait downstairs in the vestibule: like her a bit, isn't he? I never knew the rights of it, but some bounder at school began to talk about it and there was a shindy. Someone had taught him to box, and after the row he just let himself go. The joke of it was that he hated fighting: you had to wind him up like that before he'd move. I can tell you, the bounders. . . . Hallo, the curtain's going up."

It went up — on the hero of the farce in an ecstasy of drunkenness. Helena began to laugh, and Jimmy who did not know it was the long arm of coincidence and not the farce which was amusing her, had the second surprise of the evening. Because it had not occurred to him that she was the sort of person who would see the quite remarkable humour of insobriety.

At the end of the first act Sargent and his companion left their seats to speak to some people sitting nearer the front. As they stood they were on the extreme left of Jimmy and Helena, and Helena, on Jimmy's right, was half-hidden by him as he sat forward in his seat, as if trying to catch Sargent's eye. "Do you mind if I have a word with him?" he asked, just as Sargent turned, caught Jimmy's eye, raised a hand of recognition and came over towards him.

He had not yet seen Helena.

The passage of time that elapsed between his recognition of Jimmy and the moment when he stood there at their side, seemed to Helena like a century. She sat very still, looking straight ahead, hearing above the violin strains of that sickly waltz the deep painful beating of her own heart. And still Hilary had not seen her. He was coming on, steering his way carefully past the men and women who intervened between him and Jimmy; and even right at the last it was only Jimmy he saw — not that straight figure in amethyst and silver sitting

there, utterly quiet, on his right. And then Jimmy did it. He said, "Let me introduce Mrs. Courtney."

Up came the traitorous colour to Helena's cheeks; by the hugest effort in the world she turned her head, and for just an instant they remained there looking into each other's eyes, and though neither of them knew it, both were trembling. They did not shake hands. They did not say they had met before. They did not say anything. They were, both of them, beyond words. The smile on Hilary's face had not so much disappeared as stiffened. He bowed. Helena bowed. And it was over. Jimmy and Hilary drifted into their talk and Helena sat there praying for the dark.

Before it came, Hilary addressed her once — just before he turned to go. And he had the courage to look her full in the face.

"What do you think of the piece, Mrs. Courtney?"

And Helena said, "Oh, it's really very funny, isn't it?"

After all this time, that, when they met face to face, was all they could find to say to each other. The banality of it was almost unbelievable.

Unexpectedly the curtain went up on the second act. Mr. Sargent went. In the sudden gloom Helena saw him groping his way through the auditorium to his seat. On the stage the hero, drunk no longer, was making violent love to another man's wife, whose objection was not overpoweringly evident. And that, too, appeared to strike Helena as extraordinarily funny. Jimmy could not understand it. There was obviously another Helena Courtney he did not know. He wondered, poor boy, whether he liked it better or not so well, and he did not know that when Helena was not laughing her face was scornful and a little defiant, and that she was biting her lips to keep them still. . . .

As they walked home beneath a starlit sky, with a southwest wind, that smelt of rain, ruffling the deep waves of Helena's gold-brown hair, Jimmy asked her if she had enjoyed her evening. For all her merriment he could not help having his doubts about it.

And Helena, dragging her wrap out of the hands of the wind, had said, "Oh, yes. It's so much like life. Life's a farce, don't you think, Jimmy?"

Really, at that moment, that was exactly how life did look to her.

4

Either it looked a little less like it during the next few days or Helena had too many other things to think about to have time for things abstract. For she and Evey were busy making that bed-sitting-room in Guilford Street "possible," and it took some doing. But Mrs. Rogers (Helena's landlady) was amenable. She raised no objection to removing her curtains and a stuffed fish, whose pitifully open mouth very nearly convinced Helena it struggled yet for breath. She hoped Mrs. Rogers was not hurt at its banishment, but it had to be. It was Helena or the fish: they could not both live in that room. So the fish was carried forth and Helena went out and bought chintz curtains at Liberty's and an oriental coverlet with which to convert her bed into a couch by day. A diligent search in the shops of the Bloomsbury picture dealers resulted in the purchase of sepia copies of Rossetti's "Beata Beatrix" and the "Well-Beloved," and the "Aurora" of Burne-Jones. But when she had them on the walls Helena longed, despairingly, for some colour. She wanted, horribly, that little luminous sketch of Haworth away there amid Jerome's heavy oils in her mauve drawing-room. She wrestled with her mood for half the evening, then went out and bought a copy of Greiffenhagen's "Idyll," because its red sun and redder poppies answered some urgent need of hers, and because, too, she loved the line that the white arm of the shepherdess took. She bought also, on this expedition, for seven-and-sixpence each, a small plaster cast of Phryne and a head of Beethoven; and when she got them all home she wondered if she had secured the right things. The fear that she hadn't made her restless, and then Evey came in and enthused over the whole effect.

"I'm so glad you've got the Greiffenhagen," she said. "It's the first picture I ever really wanted to have. I've always remembered the look of that arm. I love arms, don't you?"

So Helena was reassured. And, anyway, this room was her own as no other room had ever been before, and she was very happy in it.

Evey came often to share her evening meal, and stayed

for "speed practice" when the table was cleared. Through the early sweet spring evenings they "swotted" together at this eternal shorthand of theirs, for Evey, too, was chasing the speed certificate. Sometimes they were at it so late that Evey would be forced to spend the night with Helena. They would sit over the fire in their dressing-gowns till midnight, and then squeeze together into Helena's bed that, properly, was only big enough for one. In the morning, wet or fine, Helena would drag Evey out of bed at seven, fling open the windows and walk her round the London streets while the room aired. When they got back Mrs. Rogers would have a fire and their breakfast ready; and presently they would walk down to the City together, almost persuaded, with Browning, that it was the best of all possible worlds, and convinced that youth and the spring must carry all before them. For both were irresistible.

The days mellowed and grew longer. In Richmond Park the little white flowers of the blackthorn were beginning to show (only Helena and Evey were too busy to go and look at them); and in the London streets women with tired eyes were selling violets.

5

Easter, in nineteen-fourteen, fell in the second week of April, and Evey and Helena went down into Surrey and spent their four holiday-days amid the gold of the gorse, beneath a windy, passionate sky. And across the land, stabbing its sweetness, they heard all day the call of the cuckoo.

Even after that Helena went back to her office quite gladly, because she was happy there, and two days later Rupert Wickham suddenly made it impossible for her to stay any longer. . . .

Afterwards she couldn't bear to remember it. Thoughts of it pursued her, however, came to her in the night. It made her sick to think of the abyss of passion she had stared down in those few seconds he had held her in his arms and struggled to kiss her. A wild beast of rage had swept down upon her: she had fought tooth and nail: had realised, horridly, how people must feel when they commit murder. But she had not been frightened. It was a consolation to be able to remember that. She had only been angry. Even though the whole staff had

gone, though she was there — alone — with this unpleasant beast; because you can't possibly be frightened when you are as angry as all that.

The picture of it all remained with her for months. Smith's daffodils lay prone on the floor: the earthen vessel which had contained them lay there, too, split neatly in half. The water had splashed the exquisite polish of Mr. Wickham's brown boots and made a long, thin track to the window. Mr. Wickham stood back against his desk whither she had managed at last to fling him. Flushed and dishevelled he stood there arranging his collar, his long legs spanning the thin track of water — like some new, unpleasant Gulliver fording a Lilliputian river. . . .

And with the picture there remained in her mind the sound of running feet on the stairs without, and Smith's voice as he tugged on the other side of the door Wickham had locked. It said something about a forgotten overcoat and a key in the pocket. . . . And then, Smith's look as he came in — Smith who had brought her the daffodils from his garden, who had talked to her of his wife and baby. . . .

It was Smith, too, who laughed when she went running down the stairs. . . . She knew his laugh when Wickham made a joke.

6

She had no memories at all of what came after until she found a seat (much later) on the Embankment and slipped into it. She realised, then, that her head ached — that it ached dreadfully, so that she had to take off her hat because she simply couldn't bear it on. She sat there watching the steady, stately procession of tramcars moving on across Westminster Bridge. In front of her a river-sign advertising somebody's tea and another advertising somebody else's whisky, tortured her eye-sight. She wished vaguely that they might go out, or that the hand controlling their colour-mechanism, for just once, would blunder. Red, green, red, green . . . as though there were no other colours in the world. But presently even the river-signs failed to disturb her. She was so glad to be still, so glad to sit down. . . . It was appalling to be as tired as this, not to care whether you were ever going to be sufficiently rested

to go home or not. Nothing mattered, or at least, nothing would matter if only that throbbing pulse in her temples would slow down and be still. And when it did she would get up and go on.

7

Chance plays a queer game. . . .

Down there where the trams pull up beneath Waterloo Bridge Hilary Sargent was saying good night to a friend. At a swinging stride he came along presently in Helena's direction, his hands in his pockets, his head thrown back and up, as if the sensation of the evening air on his face delighted him. So still Helena sat it was almost as if she knew he must come — as if she waited. Yet the truth was that she did not know — that she sat there thinking of just nothing at all.

A queer game. But sometimes, if you are clever enough, you can follow the moves. You could have followed them now. Hilary came on and Helena continued to sit there, very still, for all the world as though she awaited him. And Chance chalked her trick and waited too.

The next trick was Hilary's. He paused in his long comfortable stride and looked across at that quiet figure sitting slightly huddled on a public seat on the Embankment. The harsh glare of a street lamp fell full upon her lowered head, turning her hair to fire. And it was her hair which pulled Hilary up. On that shadowed thoroughfare it looked like something glowing — something that you might warm your hands at. No one, least of all Hilary Sargent, could have missed it. But for a moment he hesitated. Even with Chance playing heavily for you there are things which seem impossible. This for Hilary was one of them. His little diffident pause seemed to suggest that there are some things, too, a man cannot fight against for ever — that Hilary, at least, could not any longer fight against this. But as he hesitated she looked up and recognised him. He saw the colour run swiftly up into her face and she smiled — in that slow, crooked way of hers; the way he remembered and loved.

"It's Fate, isn't it?" he said, sitting down at her side.

She shook her head as though she did not believe in Fate, but she said nothing. She just sat there with the ghost of her

wistful smile turning up one corner of her mouth, and the colour creeping like a tide up the dead whiteness of her face. And in his heart he called her — as he always had called her — Deirdre, Deirdre of the Sorrows. The old phrase darted through his mind like the flash of a swallow's wing across the blue of June, but he wished to-night that he had not remembered it. He leaned towards her: his hand just touching her coat sleeve.

"I've tried, haven't I, to avoid you?" he asked.

"You've always tried," she said.

"I know. That's why, this time, you've got to think it's Fate. I don't see how you can possibly think it's anything else."

She seemed to consider this. The faint smile came again.

"Fate didn't rate our intelligences very high, do you think, when she ordained for us to meet at that idiotic farce?"

"Fate couldn't help that. She can only work with the materials given her. What took *you* to the farce, anyway?"

She laughed. "Jimmy," she said.

"And did you *really* think it funny?"

"Everything was funny that night," she said, "and we were funnier than anything else."

They became, after that, quite silent, as if in some shy subtle fashion each had become overwhelmingly conscious of the nearness of the other. She did not tell him of the obscene thing which had happened to her, of her hideous realisation of woman as a creature who secures immunity from unpleasant masculine attentions only at the hands of some other masculine creature with a horsewhip in his hand, or by the knocking out of two front teeth, which seemed to amount to the same thing. It was as though she realised that there was going to be plenty of time for them to tell each other things like that. But now that they were so still they looked, both of them, a little weary. Their intense calm stood revealed suddenly for the precarious thing it was — the calm of people who have ceased to struggle, who, for just this once, have so far resigned themselves to the tide as to float with it, and who have not realised as yet that the tide may be stronger than they.

BOOK III
STORM-WRACK

CHAPTER ONE

1

INDIRECTLY it was Hilary who found Helena new work. . . .

Perhaps it had struck him, as it might strike most people, that Helena in an office was rather an incongruity, but he had no use at all for the idle man or woman, and was sufficiently dissatisfied with the scheme of things to dislike profoundly the parasitic woman of his own and Helena's class.

The memory he had carried of her in that big modern house on the moors had contradicted for him continually his more intimate reading of the essential woman that you could not, anyhow, imprison in clothes and a house. Yet Hilary had stuck to it obstinately that the "essential woman" he had discerned across that stately luncheon table did really exist, that she had merely strayed into this world of solidity and comfort and, for the present, had lost her way. That was why on that first evening she seemed to him incomparably finer as she sat there discussing her plans with him — discussing them earnestly but quietly, even, he felt with certain reservations, for neither of them as yet dared to be perfectly frank with each other. He did not ask her what she was going to do when Jerome's American tour was ended, and she did not refer to it. That was one of the "reservations," and to them, at present, they paid, by instinct, a common unfaltering respect.

"I'll get hold of Nelly Kenyon," Hilary said. "I'll bring her along here to lunch to-morrow. You'll like Nelly: everyone does. And if she knows anybody who wants an amanuensis you can go ahead at once."

And, as it happened, Nelly had known of someone. She knew that the great Alexander Bletchington (editor of that popular weekly, the *Britisher*) had been recently deprived of the services of a really excellent phonographer by the enchanter whose wand is a wedding-ring. Mr. Bletchington's mortal

enemy, you gathered from Nelly, was matrimony, and at the moment it had left him in direst need of a shorthand-writer who was reliable and discreet. Above all, discreet. Miss Kenyon looked at Helena, laughed a little and said, "I should think you would suit Alexander — admirably."

The little pause before the adverb was eloquent. Helena blushed and began to protest — a trifle feebly. She did not want, she said, to suit Mr. Bletchington — like that.

Nelly laughed again. "Oh, don't worry," she said. "It's quite true most of the women Alexander Bletchington meets seem to fall flat at his feet or hang themselves about his neck. But when he does meet one who manages to preserve the perpendicular he appreciates her quite hugely. You see, my dear, she usually writes better shorthand."

So the next morning Helena presented herself at the offices of the *Britisher*, only to learn that its editor had not yet arrived. She gathered from the extremely polite and energetic young man who interviewed her that you stood as good a chance of getting a quiet five minutes with the Archangel Gabriel as you did of seeing Mr. Bletchington without an appointment. The polite young man, however, was acquainted with Nelly Kenyon: he gave Helena a test, congratulated her upon her shorthand and engaged her services on Mr. Bletchington's behalf all well within the space of a quarter of an hour.

"I'm a Pitmanite myself," he told Helena. "So's Mr. Bletchington. Doesn't use it much, now, of course. Ah-h . . . ever met Mr. Bletchington? P'raps you've heard him speak in public?"

But Helena had not, and she felt from the young man's manner that it was a reflection upon her whole existence — that she had not heard Mr. Bletchington speak in public.

"Fine speaker — born orator, born. . . . You must hear him. Holds his audience spellbound. Ought to sit in Parliament. Make 'em sit up. . . . 'Strordnary man — 'strordnary. Ah-h. . . . Come along on Tuesday, can you? Monday's press day. Better start Tuesday, eh?"

They shook hands cordially and cordially this affable young man bowed her out. And on the Tuesday morning following he ushered her into a long, well-furnished apartment with a desk at the far end before which sat a short stout man in a dark-

grey suit doing three things at once — talking to a tall flaxen man at his elbow, reading a letter held up well before his eyes, and carrying on a spasmodic conversation with someone on the telephone. Helena and the affable young man, whose name she had discovered was Vane (V-A-N-E. He had spelt it carefully, as though people usually got it wrong and it annoyed him), came to a simultaneous halt in the middle of the carpet until the flaxen man disappeared, the telephone receiver snapped back into position and the little fat man at the desk looked up. As that appeared to be the signal for a general advance, Helena and Mr. Vane walked up to the desk, and Mr. Vane began to explain.

And Alexander Bletchington said, “Good morning, my dear. Come and sit down beside me.”

Helena sat down — opposite, not beside, Mr. Bletchington, and she tried not to notice the term of endearment. Mr. Bletchington’s desk was literally covered with papers: they surrounded him, hemmed him in, looked as if at any moment they might arise and smother him. Mr. Vane, rather red about the face, but as urbane as ever, was explaining at great pains the respective claims to attention of the various piles.

“This, sir, is copy — a good deal of it marked ‘Must.’ You won’t forget to let Saunders have the apology par. we promised that clothing firm? That’s important. Masters has sent in his page 3 article, but we want some more ‘Quips and Queries’ pars. I’ve had the papers in the Latimer case looked up. These are they, sir — here on your right. Those people at Leyton threaten an action. Bluff, of course: they haven’t an earthly. . . . Our par. was fair comment. I’ll have the documents looked up for you. Ah-h. . . . P’raps you wouldn’t mind, Mrs. Courtney? Just a note Memo to Page. Please let Mr. Bletchington have *at once* all the papers in connection with our article ‘Lingering Long at Leyton,’ in last week’s issue. Type my initials on it and put it on Page’s desk outside. Anybody will show you. And underline ‘at once.’ That’s important.”

“That all, Vane?” Mr. Bletchington asked. “Well, give me just five minutes, will you, there’s a good chap. And, Vane — I’m not supposed to be here. No matter who it is, I’m not here.”

“Ah-h . . . very good,” said Vane, and went out.

Mr. Bletchington went back to his letters. Getting tired of reading over her note of Mr. Vane’s “memo. to Page,” Helena’s eyes wandered casually round the room that seemed in strange contrast with its owner who sat turning over his correspondence with a rather weary gesture — as though it was some sort of pudding that had to be stirred though his arm ached. In this atmosphere of work the settee of dark-green leather had an appearance of oddity, even though it was pushed right back against the wall and had been made a temporary receptacle for the Post Office Directory and other official-looking volumes. Even the two arm-chairs that matched it, and the third that didn’t, were so deep and capacious that it was almost as if they gaped with the boredom of their own untroubled, incongruous existence. None of them even looked as though they ever expected to be sat on, as though they quite understood that they were there not for use but for the look of the thing. Only the table that ran down the centre of the room seemed to belong to it. Two rows of chairs were pushed up in friendly fashion closely against its sides, and ink-bottles and pen-trays set out at regular distances upon its highly polished surface. It stood secure in the knowledge of its own importance, breathing forth an odour of Committees and Board Meetings, a positive old dog of a table that could have told you more than a thing or two about human nature and its weaknesses. Facing Helena, on Mr. Bletchington’s mantelpiece, was a framed reproduction of the *Britisher’s* well-known cover, two cartoons (also framed) that were tantalising because she could not get near enough to see what they were about, and a coloured print of Napoleon’s apothegm, *Good God, how rare men are!* But that, for some reason or other, nearly made her laugh. She wished Mr. Bletchington would begin. He sat there frowning over his letters, every now and then transferring to his waistcoat pocket the stamp which some of his correspondents, in the hope of a reply, had thoughtfully affixed to their communications. The action, though mechanical, was careful — carried through with a nice precision of first finger and thumb very fascinating to watch. The minutes passed and just as she was beginning to gape with the furniture Mr. Bletchington plunged suddenly into the heart of his dictation.

His voice was surprisingly low and musical. For the most part he knew what he wanted to say and said it with the minimum of words. He did not seem to feel the need of walking about and kicking down the fire-arms, as Helena's solicitor-employer had been apt to do, nor grow irritable as had Mr. Smith over the incorrigible elusiveness of the English language. Mr. Bletchington went straight ahead, his mind very plainly on the business in hand, and even when he interrupted himself to say, "I hope I don't go too fast for you, my dear," it was not in the least as Rupert Wickham had been used to ask the same thing. To Mr. Bletchington, at the moment, Helena was just a machine, into which he might pour his thoughts, in the sure and certain hope that she would presently pour them out again, quite neatly and correctly, for him to sign. Every now and then, however, he coughed candidly across the table or vehemently cleared his throat — mannerisms which Helena found almost as trying as the perambulations of the solicitor or the pleasantries of Rupert Wickham.

The dictation went on for close upon an hour, and when it ended Mr. Bletchington looked at Helena with fatherly solicitude over the rim of his spectacles, as though he hoped it had in no way inconvenienced her. He was a fat, tubby little man, with thin hair, just touched with grey, which he had ruffled during the tussle with his overwhelming mass of correspondence. His face was pale, clean-shaven and coarse-skinned; his mouth, for all its downward droop, managed in some queer fashion to suggest good-nature and an equable temper (he had both, Helena discovered later) but the name of his chins was legion.

"Thank you, my dear," he said to Helena, and his eyes searched her face. But they learned nothing from that except — as others had done — that Helena looked charming when she blushed. Mr. Bletchington was hardly the man to miss a fact of that sort.

"What a business-like little person you are, my dear!" he said to her, as she collected her papers and prepared to depart. (Nobody but Mr. Bletchington would have called Helena "little.") "But I am here to be business-like," she said, and Mr. Bletchington smiled. "So you are, my dear, so you are. Send Vane in to me, there's a good girl."

He really couldn't help it: it was constitutionally impossible for him to address a woman without some term of endearment. In time Helena got used to it, because his attitude remained exactly what it was that first day — benevolent, fatherly, oddly familiar and yet always kindly and considerate. She was never able to dislike him, though (hating all he stood for) she tried later on more than once. There, he was like Helena herself: in some subtle fashion he disarmed you, robbed you of your hostility. Though you might hate the things he did, the things he said, the things he was always going to do and to say, you couldn't hate *him*. . . .

2

It was ten days after Helena's initiation into the mysteries of the *Britisher* post that she heard of Jerome's motor accident.

That she heard it even now, at this belated hour, she owed to Jerome's sister, Angela Richardson-Courtney, who, on a visit to town had called at Cowdray House and had been sent on to Guilford Street. Helena found her waiting when she came in from the office (late, because she had been having tea with Hilary). Scented and powdered, in her elegant clothes, there was about Angela an almost overpowering sense of incongruity. She was like an orchid blooming in a vegetable garden. Moreover she was very bored with Helena's room. Nothing in it interested her: not the books, not the pictures certainly, for she disliked Rossetti's women and thought Burne-Jones's insipid, besides being scraggy and anæmic. Also, she was at the disadvantage of not knowing what they meant — if they meant anything, which she doubted. She understood the Greiffenhagen better, but wondered why Helena, of all people, should have it. It surprised her as Helena's poetry-reading had, years ago, surprised her mother.

Afterwards Helena wondered if Angela's visit was dictated by curiosity as to the whereabouts of Guilford Street and what it was like (after all, one had *heard* of Bloomsbury Square) or whether she really did think it was time Helena heard of that two-months-old accident of Jerome's. At any rate, she was in no hurry to impart her information, but listened quite calmly to Helena's account (which could no longer be avoided) of her

incursion into the ranks of business women. Even when Helena got as far as Mr. Bletchington Angela did not scream, though everything about her stiffened — even her finely pencilled eyebrows. Helena could stand that, although she did wonder how Angela did it. Neither did she mind what Angela had to say, vaguely, about “morals,” because she knew that when Angela applied the word “morals” to men she meant “women,” and when she applied it to women she meant “men.” Angela was like that, so that “morals” became a dull subject, because Helena wasn’t. . . .

It was right at the end of these things that Angela had shot her bolt. “You know, of course,” she said, “that they won’t let Jerome come back at the end of May?”

3

When Angela had finished the tale of the accident (which included details about the egregious Fownes who, of course, had escaped without a scratch, and details about Jerome’s insistence that she was not to be told) Helena was frightened. Not for herself but for Jerome. It was outrageous, somehow, that she didn’t care more — that her chief sensation should be one of irritation because Jerome had kept her in the dark — treated her like a child who must be shielded, saved from the truth. She ought to care — more and differently — because Jerome might have been killed. Something wild and scared rose up in her at the thought, something ugly and ghastly that had to be slain, there on the instant, before she could listen, properly, to what Angela was saying. She felt cold, as though the wind had shifted suddenly to the east.

Later, when Angela had gone the thought stayed. It was still there when Mrs. Rogers brought in her dinner, and it had not gone when Evey arrived, looking like some gorgeous tropical flower and infinitely reproachful.

“I came up twice last week and both times you were out,” she said.

Helena did not look at her.

“I’m sorry, dear. You chose the wrong evenings. I went to the theatre.”

"Then I think you might have asked me."

"I went with a friend."

"With the same friend both times? In one week?"

"I'm afraid so, Evey, dear."

"I'm jealous."

"Dear, there's no need."

"Male or female?"

Helena was suddenly absorbed in her dinner.

"Male!" said Evey, watching the colour come up into Helena's cheeks. "You're not going to keep it up, are you, Lena?"

"Keep what up?"

"I mean, there isn't always going to be someone else now, like this, is there? Will you come to Richmond with me on Saturday?"

"I've promised to lunch with my sister-in-law."

"Oh . . . I forgot. I have to reckon with these grand relations of yours, have I, as well?"

"Relations-in-law," Helena said. "They don't count, do they?"

"If they are as grand as all that they do. But even at the Ritz or the Carlton — or wherever you're going — you don't take quite all the afternoon over your lunch, do you? Can't you manage tea somewhere, Lena?"

Helena hesitated.

"All right," said Evey. "I understand. That's booked, too."

Her eyes were on Helena's face. She had never seen Helena with this rare glow about her. "What have you done to yourself?" she asked. "You look — I don't know how to put it — as if someone had lighted you up inside."

Helena laughed, a little uneasily. "It's because I'm hot," she said. "I walked down from the office and the sun was in my face the whole way."

Evey said, "Rubbish. *That* isn't the reason. You don't look *hot*. If I can't have Saturday will you come for a walk with me this evening?"

The examinations were over. It would not be Pitman who would monopolise the sweet summer evenings as he had monopolised those of the spring. . . .

"Of course. I'd love a walk."

"Then hurry up and finish eating," Evey said. "It's after seven already." She got up and came round to the back of Helena's chair. "And you'll tell me, won't you, all about this horrid male creature who's come between us?"

"He hasn't come between us, Evey. No one will ever do that."

"Of course he has. Don't try to be nice about it, Lena. There are two male creatures in the way — the new one and your husband. Only he, somehow, hasn't mattered. But I'm not a vampire. I know I can't have you altogether to myself, however much I might like it."

"Evey, you're rather a dear."

"I know," said Evey. "Who is he, this horrid male? Do tell me all about him."

"Really, dear, there's nothing to tell. It's someone I knew in Yorkshire a long time ago. I met him recently quite accidentally here in London."

"But there must be a lot more than that."

"There isn't, really."

She meant there was nothing to tell — nothing she could possibly tell. Evey shrugged her shoulders, moved away and began to dip into Helena's books. She came first of all upon the little pile Mrs. Rogers had cleared from the table when she brought in Helena's dinner. They had bored Angela an hour ago to distraction. Even Evey wrinkled her brows at them: *Women in Political Evolution* by Joseph McCabe, *The Origins of Religion* by Andrew Lang, and two others by a man neither Evey nor Angela had heard of before. They were *Morocco in Diplomacy* and *Red Rubber* by E. D. Morel. It was these that Evey held up to Helena.

"I say . . . whoever put you on to these?" she asked. "I didn't know you went in for politics."

"Why not?" Helena said, "don't we want a vote?"

But Evey's eyes were sharper than Angela's and she saw what that lady had missed. Inside the cover of each of the volumes, in the top left-hand corner, was a name written in correct but untidy shorthand, and Evey, of course, could read shorthand. She read this signature quite easily. It was "Hilary Sturge Sargent."

"I like your friend's name," she said over her shoulder to Helena, "but he doesn't write very good shorthand, does he?"

4

That was on the Thursday. On the Saturday following Helena went to Richmond with Hilary. That was why she couldn't meet Evey, as Evey, of course, had guessed. The lunch with Angela did not count. . . .

Hilary was waiting when Helena reached the Bureau de Change at Charing Cross, although she had left Angela in her Metropole splendour in such good time that she arrived wholly five minutes before the appointed hour. Her heart, when she saw him, gave a great bound, because everything about him — not merely his face — seemed to express his joy in the sight of her. All the world could see, and all the world must not. . . . They waited in a delicious, delicate excitement for a 33 'bus, and when it came, rode on the top front seat all the way to Richmond.

The world that afternoon seemed very young and fresh, its blue and green splashed into delicate beauty by the mauve of lilac and the pale gold of laburnum. In the London parks the children were playing: from the flower-sellers' baskets in the streets below narcissi and daffodils urged you to buy them because they would soon be gone, an appeal charged heavily with the tender sadness that is the note of all beautiful things that cannot stay. Overhead white clouds drifted idly across a sky of azure, towards which the London trees stretched eager arms — like Pagan priests at their invocations. In the old gardens at Richmond the red and white of the fruit trees dotted all the land: across the broad sweep of the park the warm breezes raced and the cuckoo went calling.

It was of these things Helena thought when the day was done. And of one thing else — that Hilary had called her Deirdre and that she had rebuked him because Deirdre had brought sorrow to all the people she loved. That was the phrase she used because that was how she thought of it, but when it was out she had blushed because of the terrible sweetness of the word, because of the look on Hilary's face and because of the terrible sweetness of that. . . .

It was a perfectly glorious afternoon, so glorious that they must not, they decided, have another like it. That was the thought that occurred to both of them, and though every now and then it twisted about, changed its form or clothed itself differently, it remained substantially the same thought. But for all that Hilary went home to his Saturday evening gathering of friends (who came whether or not he was there to receive them) feeling hot and bitter and resentful, and, right at the end, very tired and flat. Standing there on his doorstep, fitting his key in the lock, he wanted Helena so badly that he wondered in a sort of shivering apprehension how he was going to exist without her. The front door closed with a bang behind him, and a minute later his Crowd absorbed him, just when the Crowd had given him up.

In Guilford Street Helena, too, was feeling tired and flat, and was glad when the postman came and brought her a letter, though it was from Lucy and was not in the very least interesting. It reproached Helena for not having been to Putney for so long and suggested tea on the morrow. And Helena, who was tired of that twisting, stabbing thought, decided that she would go, because in that sugary little house at Putney there would be no room for the thought and no room, either, for Hilary Sargent. She smiled at that — a smile that began bravely and twisted awry midway — and tearing Lucy's letter across, she threw it suddenly on to the fire. Lucy wrote the kind of letters you could do that with. They had no soul. It didn't hurt you, somehow, to watch them burn.

5

At Putney, however, Helena had something more than tea. She had a brief vision of the strength of the conventions she and Hilary had defied for a fortnight between them and a long sermon from her brother-in-law who, with Lucy, had been at Richmond the previous afternoon and had seen them together. John had been very trying at supper in his assumptions, deductions and platitudes, but Lucy had tried hard, beneath John's eagle eye, to be as broad-minded as possible about things.

"I thought your friend very nice-looking yesterday," she

said to Helena, who was pleased because she could laugh at Lucy's way of putting it. "Oh, you needn't limit it to yesterday," she said, "he usually looks rather like that, you know." But while John talked and Lucy tried to tone down what he said, Helena realised that, at bottom, she did not care in the least what John or Lucy or anybody else thought or said of her. Nothing like that would influence her when the time came. And perhaps it *would* come. . . .

It was of quite other things she thought on the way home up there on the top of her 'bus — of Lucy's tired face and fading prettiness (Lucy, who was not yet twenty-two!); of her continual efforts to keep the children from disturbing their father, and of John himself — and his fiddling complaints at supper about things that didn't matter in the least. . . . Somehow, a little vinegar was getting mixed with the sugar of that little Putney household, and Helena liked it even less that way. Marriage did not give people beauty or understanding, and she felt it ought — that the best sort of marriage did. And Helena sighed, because the night was large and peaceful and people's lives were narrow and circumspect, a little mean and ugly. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

1

NOT once during the ensuing week did Helena and Hilary meet: nor did they write. It was as though that persistent thought of Saturday had dropped between them like a curtain. But Helena, at least, went serenely on her way, vaguely pleased at her own inward calm, as though she knew that presently the curtain would lift.

Meantime, as far as she was concerned, there was a slack time at the *Britisher* office, for Mr. Bletchington was swept from one race-course to another by the impetus of the Spring Races. Mr. Bletchington was a "sportsman": the man in the street said of him that he loved the "gee-gees," and applauded him to the echo when he asserted that every man ought to be allowed his bottle of Bass and his shilling on a horse. That was a "stunt" which accounted as Helena speedily realised, for a good third of the *Britisher's* circulation. The Englishman is a liberty-loving creature, and this, certainly, was a declaration that sounded perilously like liberty. Mr. Bletchington was out to let the working-man have his innocent amusement because it was easy and cost him personally just nothing at all. And even if the man in the street lost his shilling (which, maybe, he could ill afford to do) still he had the pleasure of seeing Mr. Bletchington in the Grand Stand, talking to a lot of people more or less in the public eye, and he had the gratification of saying to the man with whom he rubbed shoulders, "Do you know who that is? That's Bletchington. He's a jolly good fellow, he is. Clever chap, too. Ought to be Prime Minister of England."

A new note crept into the *Britisher* post during that week of the Spring Races, and on Mr. Bletchington's return Helena presented him with two neat piles of letters which dealt exclusively with the races: and he had looked at her rather whimsically over the top of his spectacles as she explained.

“Here are fifty-nine letters from people who recognised you at Manchester yesterday, Mr. Bletchington, and these are from sixty-one people who think your horse should have won.”

And Mr. Bletchington said, “So it ought. Did they back it?”

“Yes — that’s why they’ve written.”

Mr. Bletchington took a short way with the fifty-nine and the sixty-one. He lumped them together and replied to them brightly in the Correspondence Columns. “F.A.B., C.E.V., and over a hundred others, etc., etc.” Helena typed the paragraph and marked it “Must,” which meant that on no account must the printer crowd it out and deprive the hundred and twenty men in the street of the reward of their zeal.

That type of letter Helena found amusing: but certainly that was not the word to apply to the bulk of the correspondence which found its way to the *Britisher* office. Mr. Bletchington’s editorial post revealed, day by day, to Helena not a little of the sordid side of life. In a very definite way it educated her, just as those three weeks in the lawyer’s office had done: confirmed her impression that for all its surface jollity and beauty, life, deep down, for thousands upon thousands of people was a hideous business that you simply dare not think too much about. What they all wanted, what they all asked for, was “relief.” Not justice: not what the world owed them: not what they should have claimed, boldly, as their birthright. For the poor do not fight; they are too occupied in eking out a miserable existence, in making “both ends meet,” in keeping body and soul together. They hold out their hands for the world’s “leavings” — for some scrap of its superfluous cash — and are quiet again if they get it.

Not all the *Britisher*’s correspondents, however, wrote from the pit. Some sat precariously on the edge; some had never been in it, and some seemed not to know there was any pit at all. Helena’s mind, when for two hours each morning she sat reading Mr. Bletchington’s editorial post, was capable of two emotions only — the one pity, the other contempt. Pity for the wretched and contempt for a world which suffered them, which scarcely knew they existed, which held that poverty was a crime, an unpleasant thing it was determined at all cost not to think about.

Mr. Bletchington's correspondence revealed one thing else — the way the writers of it regarded Mr. Bletchington himself. In the public mind he stood for the typical Englishman, and Helena wondered why, because it seemed to her that he was typical not so much of Englishmen as of most men (and a good many women) everywhere. He stood for "things as they are," with as many modern improvements as could be managed without inconvenience to the men in possession. The public saw him as a plain man with plain views, bluff, hearty, good-natured and anti-Puritanic (useful word!). How far the public was right and how far it was wrong in its estimate Helena had little chance of judging, but she was not disposed to be grateful to anybody who was assured (and who assured others) that the world was by no means a bad place, and that if it were altered here and altered there quite a good deal might be done with it. Because Helena didn't believe it could be altered — except radically, from the bottom upwards. She had said so once to Jerome, driving at his side through a maze of mean streets, and Jerome had laughed, patting her hand. "Don't you worry your pretty head," he had said.

"But we ought to worry. We ought to worry horribly. If we worried enough — if everyone of us in our nice houses worried, we could do something."

"We *do* 'do' something. Some new patch goes on the system every day of our lives."

"I don't believe you can patch it up. It's got to be pulled down. We've got to start again — and differently."

It sounded feeble: she knew that before Jerome patted her hand again and changed the subject. And probably it was feeble, but she had gone on believing it. She believed it now, with Mr. Bletchington saying the exact opposite week after week and week after week.

But for his "bluffness" and heartiness, Alexander Bletchington, so Helena thought, was steeped in sentimentalism. In his way he was as sticky as that little house in Putney, or as the little house in Putney had been. Sentimentalism smudged every article he wrote; it trickled out from the page on to the fingers of the reader, and you wondered why the pen that wrote it did not stick to the paper. And his public loved him for it. Young girls wrote for his autograph, for his portrait to hang

over their beds (they put it like that, most of them), and to Helena's eternal amusement one young woman writing from the Midlands addressed him as "My Hero." (You felt he really was!) Not only the working man and the artisan and little clerk, but men of wide education and experience — doctors, clergymen, writers, professional men and women of all sorts — wrote for his opinion on a variety of subjects and subscribed to the companies he floated. But for Helena he remained a "little" man — insufferably vain and conceited, hardened in his own egoism (so that he could actually say he didn't care what people said of him as long as they said *something!*): and clever, with the showy cleverness that, without being deep, appeals to the crowd — the crowd that, though it starved, must have a demi-god. Not all his "bluffness" nor his good-nature atoned for these things she read in him. Once — and once only — she wrote of him to Jerome. Somehow she never cared to do it again, though she never quite knew why. Perhaps because Jerome's reply was not exactly effusively approving.

"He is the sort of man (she said then) who looks at life eternally across a well-laid table. When he gets to heaven — and of course he will get there — he will first of all inquire the way to its premier restaurant. To the people who don't accept him he is either a supreme joke or a supreme tragedy, and to his million readers (who do) either a demi-god or an encyclopædia. (That is the sort of public we have.) He believes there is always going to be a man on top and a man down below. He even thinks it right and proper that this should be so, but he thinks the man on top should be liberal with his crumbs. This, to do him justice, he is, and on much the same principle which prompted my Aunt Milly to have us to stay with her when we were young and had to be 'suitably married.' The kind of generosity which costs you personally nothing at all is usually worth — just that. . . . Mr. Bletchington, however, has brain (quite a lot of it) without intellect; charm (personality, if you like) without attraction, and he addresses all women under thirty as 'my dear.' This he does partly on principle and partly because he thinks, being women, that they like it. So they do, unfortunately, most of them. . . ."

Later, she decided it was that last passage which had introduced that icy note into Jerome's reply.

2

It was on Saturday that the curtain lifted, when Hilary's note lay on Helena's breakfast-tray. It contained none of the beginnings common to polite letter-writers. It plunged straightway into the middle of its subject and it was very short. It said:

"Will you come on Saturday and meet some friends of mine? They're an interesting crowd that you'll like. Do come. Why not to tea? Early. Say at four."

It was signed just "H.S.S.," and appended was a beautifully drawn map which showed her how the studio might be reached.

She went, but as she stood on Hilary's doorstep and pulled at his bell, an outrageous feeling of panic swept down upon her. She heard his feet on the stairs and had a frantic desire to turn and run. Then the door flew open, shut again, and she and Hilary were going together up the staircase. She felt that they were cut off from the world, the world of 'buses and traffic from which she had just emerged. The shutting of Hilary's hall door behind them had rendered it as remote as the poles.

At a turn of the broad old-fashioned staircase he flung open a door and stood aside for Helena to pass through. What she saw first was just a big room, from which blue and silver jumped out at you, with an immense window, a wood fire, and before it a white table laid for two. There was no one at all in the room save a huge, long-haired cat curled round in a circle on the hearthrug. As Helena stooped to stroke him two bright yellow eyes looked out suddenly from the ball of fur and almost immediately disappeared again, as if their owner realised that the new arrival boded no sort of disturbance to his peaceful afternoon. Helena was feeling a little dazed, a little bewildered, and she was grateful above all things to this gorgeous black creature just for being there.

"What a beautiful cat!" she said.

With his back to her, Hilary was drawing a deep blue curtain across the door by which they had entered. Its heavy folds seemed to Helena to push the outer world even a little farther away still. It was very quiet. There was no sound at all in the blue and silver room save the black cat's regular breathing and the cheery singing of a bright copper kettle on a gas-ring in the hearth. Hilary was taking great pains with his curtain, but as Helena spoke he gave it a final tug and looked round. Neither of them was quite at their ease.

"Oh, Mark Antony," he said. "Yes, isn't he?"

She smiled at his Roman name for a Persian cat. "Where's everybody else?" she asked.

"Everybody else? Oh . . . there isn't going to be anybody else."

"But you said. . . . You said there was to be a 'crowd.'"

"But not to tea. I'm quite sure I didn't say to tea."

It was quite true. He hadn't said so: he had merely suggested that *she* should come to tea. She had not realised that until this minute. "Casuist!" she said, "and when does the 'crowd' arrive?"

"At seven or thereabouts."

"And it's now barely four."

"I know. It was just ripping of you to be early like this."

Hilary knelt down suddenly in front of his rather unnecessary fire and poked it into a brighter blaze. It crossed Helena's mind that he, too, perhaps was having an "awkward" minute.

"Don't be angry, Deirdre," he said.

She flushed. "With you?"

"With yourself."

"Why with myself?"

"For reading more into my letter than I put into it."

"How very dishonest you are!" she said, and the flush deepened.

"I wonder if I am? Anyway, it was worth it. Because, if I'd have been as honest as all that you mightn't have come."

And, as to that she said nothing, he pressed his point further.

"Would you have come, Deirdre?"

"No — of course not. I mean . . . I don't think so."

"There you are, you see! I had to go on the assumption that you *were* — like that."

"Like what?"

"That you were a little (only a very little) conventional."

She sat there silent, staring at the broad back he presented to her, as he knelt there before his fire, doing things with hot water and a teapot. And she thought that in this accusation of conventionalism which he lodged against her, she saw merely a defence of his own action in asking her there. For, if ever she was, Mrs. Grundy was justified here. She had a clear case. The flaming sword she held out was no thing of tinsel and paper: it was a reality that should have separated them for ever. But just now it was going to do nothing of the sort, because they were both steadfastly regarding it as a magnet, drawing them together, and Mrs. Grundy was hopelessly out-classed. But in their hearts they knew, both of them, that these stolen hours were dangerous — more dangerous than anything which had preceded them — and very sweet.

"Don't be angry," Hilary said, looking up from his toby teapot. How *could* she be angry when she smiled like that?

"I'm not," she said, "now."

"Then take off your hat. It's a cardinal sin that you should ever wear a hat."

She took it off and put it down on the floor at her side.

"And now. What is there for tea?"

"Teacakes, cress sandwiches, bread and butter and an American cake."

"And did you cut the sandwiches?"

"No. Would you have liked them better if I had?"

She laughed, but said nothing. Hilary reached a spoon from his neatly-laid table, lifted the lid of his teapot and stirred its contents round, once, very carefully.

"All the best tea-makers do that," he assured her, "and afterwards they leave it for just one minute."

He used that minute to look at Helena in her blue-gold frock with its square-cut neck from which her face rose, flushed and sweet, like a pink tulip. Everything about her was fine and rare, and yet not exotic. Even the shoes she wore surprised and delighted him, combining in some quite magic fashion daintiness and common sense. No other woman of those he

knew or had known managed to secure that happy blending in just that way. He felt that Helena must always go shod in comfort because at any moment she might be devoured by a passion for walking. Do what you would, you could not think of her in a hot-house. It was still, for all this dainty apparel, of the moors and the uplands that you thought as you looked at her. London had left her unspoiled. For Hilary, she was like Aurora, who had for children the winds and the stars; and the winds and the stars and the sun were all enmeshed in Helena's hair. The sun most of all, perhaps. Whatever light there was in a room was caught, always, by the warmth and glow of it, as the firelight was caught now. The day was dull and uncertain, but in the glow of Hilary's wood fire, Helena's hair turned every now and then to flame, giving her a burnished, ardent look that was repeated again in the glow of her skin. Blue and gold was the note of her. She was like the morning — might have run by Aurora's chariot as she drove to open the gates of day. From head to foot she was fine and exquisite and from head to foot he loved her.

Something new about him — some fresh look in his eyes, some fleeting emotion of her own, made her say abruptly, "Don't you think the tea is drawn by now?"

3

They had their tea, talking the while. And though it was extraordinary how the conversation continued to skim lightly over the surface of things, every now and then they looked at each other and it was as if they said: "Isn't this clever of us? I wonder how we do it?" And sometimes it was as if they said: "Never mind *how* we do it. We've got to keep it up."

But presently Helena forgot. "We're talking a great deal of nonsense," she said.

"I know," Hilary agreed. "People do, sometimes when they're happy. Are you happy?"

"I think I am — very."

"Don't you know?"

She wouldn't answer that.

"Would you know if you'd got to heaven? Would you recognise it when you saw it, Deirdre?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. Would you?"

"Rather."

"What sort of a place would it be?"

"I'm afraid, Deirdre, it would be just any place where you happened to be."

The surface of their lucent, tranquil pond trembled suddenly into a wave. But Hilary wouldn't step back from it. Neither of them at that moment, was going to step back. They stood there together, very precariously, on its edge, and they looked at each other and smiled. Their carefulness dropped from them like a cloak. They let it lie where it fell.

"You're very absurd," she said.

"Am I? What sort of a place is your heaven, Deirdre?"

"Is there more than one?"

"Six others, at least, because this is the seventh."

"The seventh?"

"Of delight."

She didn't look at him, but she said, "My heaven may not be yours."

"You really think it isn't?"

"Ought one to be . . . tricked . . . into heaven?"

She was suddenly serious. On the instant she saw this friendship as a thing of tricks and shadows. And she didn't want it to be like that. She wanted it open and frank . . . like a picnic in the sun, a picnic for two! As though it could ever be that for long! As though for them it could ever be that at all! Her eyes were suddenly sombre.

"Why not, if you like it when you get there? Or *don't* you like it now that you're here, Deirdre?"

She looked at him then, the colour very rich and quick in her cheeks. She looked, as Evey would have said, "All lighted up inside." Hilary did not know Evey or her phrase, but as he looked at Helena his blood leaped, and he thought: "I was mad to bring her here like this, mad. . . ."

"Of course I like it," she said. "May I have another cup of tea?"

He saw that she had picked up again that cloak of terrible carefulness. He said nothing, but his hand shook as he poured out her tea. And at the back of his brain his thought completed itself: "And she was mad to come. . . ."

Even so it might have been all right if he had not shown her his pictures. Or if she had not seen more of them than he meant she should. . . .

They stood, most of them, with their faces to the wall, so that Hilary had to turn them round for her to look at. They made her proud and yet very humble; touched some fine tender chord within her that had been touched only once before, when she had looked with Hilary upon the little misty Haworth sketch as it had stood like a streak of amethyst and gold against the background of her Bechstein grand. Though she knew nothing of art she had a natural feeling for beauty: it explained her love of the moors and of poetry. She felt dimly that joy and happiness meant just that — the perception of the beautiful, and the work of Hilary Sargent seemed to her beautiful beyond all things. His landscapes fascinated her. They had, all of them, an atmosphere of the weird, of the unusual — as though the painter had got at the back of things and saw something which most people did not even know was there at all; as though what he painted was the soul of things — mystic, unfathomable; tragic, sometimes, as the Haworth sketch had been. She saw the same thing much more faintly in the portraits he showed her; but she was less sure of its significance here. She could read the face of nature with more readiness than that of humanity. Her very indifference to you gave to nature a perfect freedom in which to be herself — ugly, beautiful, captivating or repellent; but men and women were not indifferent to you, and they could hide — if they wished — so much that was real in themselves that you might very well never come to know them, actually, at all. These faces of men and women that she looked at this afternoon were just so many enigmas to her. They seemed to her well-painted, but she was too uncertain of herself to offer an opinion there — too humble. Yet she wondered why one of them (the head of a man, thin, gaunt, and with eyes that questioned) should be so oddly familiar to her. The head belonged, so Hilary said, to the oldest friend he had.

“He gave me my first art lessons. You’ll like Arthur Yeomans.”

“But why should his face be familiar to me?”

“You’ve met his sister, Mrs. Wyatt.”

Helena flushed. She had qualms, sometimes, even now, about that interrupted friendship with Ursula Wyatt. She simply had not been able to bear her talk of Hilary and his work. Headaches were not really satisfactory as excuses, especially when you looked (as Helena did) as though headaches were accidents rather than a habit.

“But Mr. Yeomans,” she objected now, “isn’t a scrap like his sister.”

“I know. But you look — there *is* something. You’d think it was the eyes until you came to paint them, and then you’d find that even they were different. It’s very queer.”

Helena went close and peered at the portrait. She saw the thick, almost lumpy fashion in which Hilary put on his paint, and it seemed to her, grotesque, absurd, that by doing that he got the effect he did. For she felt vaguely that the portrait was fine, that the painting had force, courage, strength about it. Yet pictorial art to her was Black Magic. She wrinkled her fine brows over it, and the tip of her nose took that slight upward curve, as you might upon occasion catch it doing. Hilary caught it now and he laughed.

“It’s a wearisome business,” he said, “this looking at other people’s pictures. You’re sure you’re not bored? Perhaps you’ve seen enough?”

She only said, softly, with a little intake of her breath, “Bored!”

It struck him that she looked shy and fugitive, like a white flower of the hills in a bowl of orchids.

“I wish,” he said suddenly, “that you’d come and sit for me one day. Will you? I promise not to tire you out.”

The glow about her deepened. “I should be pleased, some day,” she said.

“That’s vague. What about a Sunday — quite soon? And quite early. When the light’s at its best.”

What was left of Mrs. Grundy, poor dear, must have fled in horror from the sound of his voice, and from the sight of Helena standing there bathed in joy. Great waves of it rolled over her, swamping her, waves of wild, delirious, unexpected happiness. They caught at her breath, robbing her of words.

"You haven't answered, you know," Hilary said presently.

"I shall be pleased," she said again, "and whenever you like. . . ."

But she was grateful to him for turning back to his canvases instead of standing there looking at her. She noticed (even across this queer, unbelievable agitation of hers) that Hilary only glanced very hurriedly at the next batch of pictures and passed on. The thought flashed through her brain: "Why doesn't he show me those?"; she took a step forward and the next instant her foot had caught against the edge of the foremost and the whole batch came clattering noisily down upon the floor.

"Oh, how clumsy . . ." she began, and then stopped, her eyes on the one picture she could see in its entirety — a water-colour sketch of a girl in blue and gold, who sat writing in the path of a winter sun. Beyond the window a November garden, and over it November's silvery mist. Her Yorkshire garden, and she sitting there on that first day — waiting. She remembered for what — for the luncheon bell to ring. . . .

She lifted her eyes from the picture to Hilary's face, but he evaded the glance, stooped and began to pick up his displaced canvases. She stood there, making no attempt to help, hearing his voice come a little thick, a little hard.

"I wasn't going to show you these. But perhaps now you'd better see them all."

He set them out neatly before her. Something mechanical within her counted them as he did so — four, five, six, seven. . . .

"Eight!" she said, almost to herself.

"I did them from memory, and that's not all. There's a whole book of sketches."

She stood there looking from one to the other of them, her hands clasped quite tightly in front of her, her mouth a twisted piteous bow in her white face. Because she had thought, that day at the Red House, that she had deceived herself, that he had not cared. And he had cared, all the time, like this. Suddenly something hot welled up in her throat, choking her: a mist before her eyes blotted out the pictures. She heard Hilary saying, "You see . . . how it is," and then, very slowly, she lifted her hands and covered her white face with them. Hilary stood there looking at her, struggled to stay

where he was and then went forward and tried to pull down her hands.

“Don’t,” he said, “don’t. What’s the matter?”

Her hands resisted his.

“Don’t hide your face, Deirdre,” he said. “I want to look at you, and I can’t if you won’t uncover your face.”

And still her hands resisted his.

“Deirdre. Look at me. Look at me, dear.”

She let him draw her hands down. Her fingers against his were wet. He looked at her, and he said:

“Deirdre. . . . You look very beautiful, I think, with the tears in your eyes.”

Of his voice nothing remained but a passionate whisper, but the passion had awe in it, awe and wonder and reverence. That, perhaps, most of all. Reverence for her and for the wonderful thing that was happening to them both despite their effort to prevent it. For an instant it was as if they swayed helplessly towards each other—something impalpable, intangible stretched between them, drawing them together, and then, because there was no help at all for it, he had her in his arms, his mouth on hers.

Outside, the moon, very young and thin, a pale wraith in the afternoon sky, came up and looked in at them, as it had looked at them once before. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

1

THE evening that followed remained with Helena as a mere jumble of recollections — odds and ends of her talk with Arthur Yeomans about many things, feminism, the Brontës, books and of Yorkshire, and the way the sun came up like fire over Haffington Ridge. And things about Hilary and his last year's Academy picture, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," which had brought him many portrait commissions that bored him as much as the sitters. A strange, unfamiliar Hilary, this, who would have it there wasn't time for life and a career — that you had to decide which you wanted the more.

Mixed up with this conversation was a girl's playing of Chopin, a girl who wore black and white and whose portrait hung over the Blüthner grand at which she played. Helena remembered the racing of slim, white fingers over the keyboard, holding a twisting and turning melody well in hand — like a strong wrist on the bridle of a thoroughbred. But she remembered more than that: she remembered that once Hilary raised his eyes and looked at her, as though through the music he sent her some message she would catch and understand. But she had flushed and looked away, as though, after all, she had not understood — or had understood too well.

And besides the Chopin, and Arthur's conversation, there were echoes of what other people said — queer, bright tantalising talk of politics, art, some Impressionist Exhibition in East London; *personalia* by Nelly, a violin solo by a girl in a red frock who looked like a streak of flame against Hilary's black piano; ragtime by the young man who played her accompaniment (an outrageously brilliant performance, this, at which the black and white girl who played Chopin raised scornful shoulders); a smashing criticism by Hilary of somebody's

sketch of a little Quaker-like person in grey; the lazy voice of a big girl in green addressing a pretty person in a terra-cotta frock that made her look like a pink rose growing on an old garden wall, "My dear, *do* tell us. Have we to congratulate you? . . ." And the chorus of congratulation which came when a tall someone who had been talking politics in a corner came out of it and said that they had. Only Hilary stood aloof, saying nothing, not looking at the tall someone at all and scowling at the pretty pink and white person in the terra-cotta frock.

And presently, right at the end, there was Arthur Yeomans again, helping in her search for truant hatpins, and his voice asking her carelessly if she had far to go. . . . And then Hilary's, telling her in a whisper that she wasn't to hurry . . . that she was to let them all get on.

They all did, except Arthur. Even when the hatpins were found he seemed in no hurry to do anything of the sort. It was a rather silent trio that walked down to the King's Road where Arthur presently took his leave and Hilary and Helena crossed over and waited for a 'bus. When it came they climbed on top and sat in the front seat, with clasped hands.

Guilford Street, as they walked up it, was very quiet. A pale crescent moon in a cloudy sky alone kept watch, and down the street a strong west wind came rollicking. Outside Mrs. Rogers's house they stopped short. There was a tiny bead of light in the hall—the sort of light that has the air of sitting up for you in dressing-gown and curling-pins. It "felt" very late. Suddenly, as she stood there pushing back the hair that stung her eyes and hot cheeks, Hilary drew her up closely against him and kissed her. They had forgotten the street completely: they had forgotten, in that one moment, everything in all the world, save their unutterable, terrible need of each other.

2

This jumble of odds and ends that made up an evening presently sorted itself out, so that Helena's memories and impressions tacked themselves on to the right people and remained there. Hilary helped, ticking off his friends for her one by one on the next day, when for the whole length of it he had her

to himself in his blue and silver room. (He had extracted that promise from her down there on the pavement in Guilford Street, but had not dared to believe she would keep it until he saw her standing on his doorstep, looking like a damp violet. For the day was wet — a beast of a day, as the people in the 'bus had said consolingly to each other.)

Hilary's list, of course, began with Arthur Yeomans and went to the accompaniment of the water-colour sketch he was making of Helena. It was a trifle difficult, she found, to move Arthur from the conversational stage when Hilary had got him thoroughly going. And even when at last she did manage to edge him into the wings, she was worried for several minutes afterwards by the sensation that he was standing there keeping an eye on them. For he was one of the people they would have, she and Hilary, to placate. If they went on. And she thought they would.

It was of that she was thinking while Hilary talked of Desirée Bonnard, the black and white French girl who played Chopin — who played Chopin, it appeared, to all London and Paris that cared for him, which was a good deal, even when you had made allowance for the people who preferred ragtime. Hilary had met Desirée in Paris many years ago before Paris (or London or anyone else) had heard of her, and Helena gathered that he had a very real affection for her, despite an unaccommodating temperament that was like some people's umbrella, because you never saw her without it.

Also, Hilary was fond of Barbara Fielding, the big, dark girl who had talked about the Whitechapel Impressionist exhibition and who (so Hilary said) did really beautiful modelling. (Look at that little "Diana" on Hilary's mantelpiece.) Barbara was fine: courageous and firm as steel. A man was lucky who might count Barbara Fielding his friend. And Hilary did.

There was, too, Denis O'Connell, the man who came with a string of pretty ladies and was an Irish journalist. He had definite views on Sinn Fein, Home Rule, pretty women and the poetry of Francis Thompson. Later, that was all Helena remembered about Denis O'Connell — that he believed (or was it disbelieved? Helena never quite knew) in Home Rule: that he disliked the poetry of Francis Thompson (or liked it.

Again Helena never quite knew) and had an affection for pretty women. Not that they mattered, so Hilary said. There was such a procession of them, and they were all like their prototype in the musical play who had been brought to be looked at and "not to be talked to, please." They existed as sight-refreshers; as so many boracic eyebaths. Besides, the only girl Denis really cared anything about was Barbara, who, for reasons of her own, was not likely to marry Denis.

The little pink and white person who had looked in her terracotta frock like a rose on a garden wall, was Pamela Grant. She wrote the "Georgette" column in the *Woman's Looking-glass* and similar things in similarly intellectual publications. It was very obvious that Hilary detested Pamela before he called her a boa-constrictor and sniffed at Helena's phrase about the rose and the wall. Because Pamela was the girl they had congratulated the other night. She was going to marry Ronnie Sand and the thought roused Hilary to a queer, impotent fury. Ronnie belonged to the good old days (at twenty-six he talked of them, absurdly, like that, making Helena smile): the days of the Slade and of Paris. Ronnie was an artist, and art bored Pamela not to the soul (she hadn't one) but certainly to distraction. Besides, she got very badly in the way, so that since her advent pleasant things had come to an end. Hilary and Ronnie spent, these days, but few hours together: Paris, Bucks, Surrey and Rye knew them no more. And even on these Saturday evenings you couldn't be quite sure that Ronnie would turn up, because it wasn't only art, apparently, that bored Pamela, and Pamela just now was really all that Ronnie cared about. These things, Helena saw, were bitter in Hilary's mouth.

Another person intimately bound up with the days when these pleasant things had been, was Philip Roscoe. Phil was not an artist, at least, not in pencil or pigment. His medium was words. He was on the literary staff of the *Signal*, an advanced weekly with ideas on Party Government that were apt to become tiresome and several bees in its bonnet that were at least amusing. Lately, however, Phil had left the broad highway of literature and side-tracked not after a Pamela, it is true, but after politics, which was almost as bad, since Hilary disliked the one as much as the other. Phil, it seemed, had

written a recent pamphlet entitled *Where are we Drifting?* which Hilary had not read because he didn't want to know. He never did want to know things like that because he was scornful of politics and politicians, for both bored him profoundly. Just occasionally he would read something which Phil enthused about (like the books on Red Rubber and Morocco that Helena had borrowed and which were different) but they were not things of permanent interest. Foreign politics were remote and unreal (even Phil could not make them anything else) and home politics were absurd. You heard continually that if certain things happened the country would go to the dogs: if others, that it would not. And the country remained precisely where it was. You couldn't possibly get excited about matters of this sort: life was far too interesting. And besides, the literary Phil was so much nicer than the political Phil that one hoped it would soon emerge.

Hilary had little or nothing to say of the girl in green with the lazy voice, though his dislike of her was less active than passive. She was supposed to do secretarial work for the novelist, Paynesfield, though Hilary wondered how so good a novelist could stand so bad a secretary. He was quite sure Dagmar North was bad as a secretary. She was too slow, too fat, too much the embodiment of the qualities he most disliked and which he assumed (quite unwarrantably) that Paynesfield also disliked.

Then there was Conrad Howe, the young sculptor who was responsible for the bronze relief of Hilary that hung over his mantelpiece, and who disagreed with Hilary over Dagmar. But Conrad's affection for that lady did not greatly trouble Hilary because he was quite sure Dagmar did not intend to marry him. Dagmar had other fish to fry and was very busy over them, so Hilary said. Besides, you couldn't help seeing that he cared less for Conrad and his matrimonial fate than he did for Ronnie and his.

The little person in grey was Stella Gretton, the wife of Stephen Gretton, a young Quaker, who had married her, according to Hilary, because she looked the sort of wife a Quaker ought to have, though you need not believe that unless you liked. Stephen was quixotic and idealistic and a clever

black and white artist: Stella was none of these things, but she was sweet and charming and simple and had already learned to prefer Chelsea to Brighton. Stella might very well have stepped down from a Marcus Stone picture. Marcus Stone's pictures didn't appeal to Hilary, but he certainly drew pretty women, and little Stella Gretton was pretty in just that way.

Then there were the sisters Dune — Olive and Vivien. Olive was the girl who had made the sketch of Stella Gretton upon which Hilary had been so hard (but not so hard, Hilary told her, as the sketch had been upon Stella!). Olive was red-haired and energetic. She was the sign and symbol, according to Hilary, who seemed to know all about these things, of the modern woman, who works less for results than to keep her mind employed. A great deal of leisure was a dangerous thing, and civilisation had left the moneyed woman little else. Ibsen knew that and had written *Hedda Gabler*, or *The Perpetual Warning to Fathers*. Other people to-day were seeing it too, among them Mrs. Snowden and Olive Schreiner. And before any of them there had been Charlotte Brontë. Amazing what Charlotte had known, what she had seen with that Titan-woman of hers, kneeling there on the hillside. . . .

This, Helena discovered, was another topic difficult to get Hilary to leave, but he did presently arrive at Olive's sister Vivien, the girl with the red frock and the violin. Vivien had talent and no industry. You simply could not make her work, not even Desirée, who had tried very hard and had given up in despair. Vivien was dilettante to the soul and the only person who really liked her that way was Brian Vincent, the nice-looking youth who played ragtime and (even worse) composed it. Brian did not really care either for genius or energy in a woman, and found Desirée and Olive much too exhausting. His ragtime was a hobby: more or less harmless, according to the point of view. Somewhere in the background or in the City or somewhere equally vague and remote there lurked a clerical occupation. But nobody ever referred to it, because nobody, here, was at all interested in the City. Helena did not blame them for that.

Hilary thought it was probably true that there was something between Brian and Vivien, but they were a self-contained

pair and if there were no one knew how far it had gone. And personally, Hilary thought that Vivien would find love a much too exhausting business altogether.

"But mightn't she be lazy, too, in love?" Helena asked.

"Then it's Brian who would find it exhausting," Hilary told her.

These things took up a good deal of time to relate. Later, when they were done, there was tea.

3

Later still, they talked of themselves. . . .

Less easy, this, they discovered. The evening was as wet as the day had been and Hilary had builded a fire. They sat at its side, Helena in Hilary's deep blue chair, he on a pile of cushions at her feet. Her hands caressed his hair, as if in blessing, and the silence came down upon them like mist on a mountain. The room was so still you could hear the sighing of the flames as they sped up the chimney, the sound of Mark Antony's regular breathing and the steady drip, drip of the rain. They reached the ear as separate and distinct sounds — stabbing the quiet, that seemed to fold itself yet more closely about them. The world emptied and emptied, until they only were left — the last man and the last woman, together.

Hilary was the first to speak. Ardent yet trepid, his voice divided the mist like the rising sun, and they had it out, then, between them — her story and his. Hers came first. Once she broke out in protest over it. "It isn't fair. It isn't fair. One acts in ignorance and suffers for it all the rest of life!"

But it was left to Hilary to voice the awful staggering thought that had not so much as occurred to her.

"Suppose," he said, "that . . . your husband (the word stuck in his throat) makes difficulties. Suppose he isn't 'decent'?" For that had been the word they had used. *Decent*. That was how they thought of it.

"You'd want, wouldn't you," he asked her, "the sanction of society?"

She said that she didn't know that she would.

"I shouldn't want anything — so long as I had you. Besides, if the law is really like that — if someone can stand in

the way as you think Jerome might — it's a bad law and ought to be ignored."

"Could you ignore it, Deirdre?"

She said she could.

"You really love me enough for that?"

"For much more."

"You're really not one bit afraid?"

"Of you? Of your getting tired?"

She could actually say it.

"You needn't fear that, Deirdre. But all the other things! Wouldn't they get in the way and spoil things? The lies we'd have to tell (we should, you know, to the people who simply wouldn't have the truth: there are lots of them). The deceptions, the pretences. Wouldn't you hate all those? And wouldn't you hate having to placate people when you only wanted to get on with life?"

She smiled. "All that — in Chelsea?" she said. "I thought Mrs. Grundy never crossed the King's Road?"

"Oh, Chelsea! As if I'd want to keep you cooped up in Chelsea all your life. Besides, Deirdre, I'm afraid, even if you aren't."

"Afraid that *you* may get tired?"

"No — afraid that I hate the thing that is illicit too much to live with it. . . . You're bigger on this than I am. Things haven't been spoiled for you, deep down, at the source."

Some instinct kept her silent, made her sit utterly still. Her eyes rested on that long slender hand propping his head and suddenly she remembered the touch of it against her face, and a lance pricked sharply at her heart. The feeling, the sympathy between them was absolute. He had the power to hurt: they had the power to hurt each other. Suffering and misery could touch them now only through each other.

He had moved his seat and sat opposite her, but he did not look at her as he told his story of the poisoning of the wells, but once when a little sound escaped her, he stopped short. "Can't you bear to hear it either?" he asked. "Are you as bad as I am, after all?"

Even in her pain she wanted to smile at this trick he had of charging other people with the faults he loathed in himself. That solicitor man for whom she had worked had had it. "I

suppose *you're* too proud to carry a parcel?" he had said to her once when he wanted something urgently taken to the post office and the boy was out. It was funny she should remember that now. But funnier still was the fact that Hilary had the trick too. Then the pain came back and she was crouching there at his feet, with her head on his knee.

It was dark before they had finished with that old story of his — and that of hers, which though less old might come to matter even more. And at the end they sat like two solitary survivors amid the calamitous wreck of things. There seemed no more to say. They sat silent, their hands clasped, with the blue flame of the fire dancing along the floor and up the walls, and making weird shadows on their white faces.

CHAPTER FOUR

1

A MISERABLE old story, but Helena was ready, it seems, to risk even that. She snapped her fingers at its evil legacy of apprehension. She cared enough for that. . . .

So they stopped being serious and grown-up and became like two children playing in the sun. They would cross no more bridges as yet nor think of them stretched out for them in the future, dark and uncertain, as a forest at midnight. Helena had said, "I could write. But I won't. I'm not a coward — or not that sort of coward, anyhow. I'll wait until Jerome comes back. . . ."

A Fool's Paradise! It wasn't much, but it was the best they could do for Jerome at the moment. It didn't prevent them (that thought of him there) from being happy. Nothing could do that. There was the picture to sit for: plays to see, books to read and walks to take. To this first period of quiet happiness belonged Helena's discovery of Bucks and Hertfordshire: of the Surrey villages nestling beneath the great shoulders of Leith Hill and Box Hill. Hilary had found them before and had forgotten them, so that rediscovering them with Helena was something of an adventure. But wherever they went Richmond retained for them all the compelling power of first love. They went back to it again and again and each time they agreed that the view from the Terrace was really "one of the finest in England." The phrase was no longer just an extravaganza of the advertisement people. When they looked at it together it just was all they claimed for it. Things were better when they saw them together. That was why Hilary longed to take Helena to Bruges. It did matter, somehow, whom you saw places with. . . .

Hilary was told all about Evey, of course. "Your wonderful Evey," he called her teasingly to Helena, who didn't mind in the least, because Evey *was* "wonderful." Desirée's wish to hear Estelle play served as a good reason why the sisters should be asked one Saturday evening to the studio. They came. Estelle in white, with her starlike beauty, chaste and remote, a pale aureole of shimmering hair and passionate, wide-set eyes; and Evey in an orange frock unrelieved by anything save her own vivid complexion and the dead black of her hair. Evey was one of the few people who could wear brilliant colours without their stealing her own. Beside her burning incarnadined beauty Helena's had a pellucid diaphanous note. Against Evey's passionate fervour her calm serenity was like a star shining on still water. Looking at them together Hilary thought of the June sun on Sussex gorse and of moonlight on ice.

Nelly's sharp eyes had lighted instantly on Evey. "My dear, wherever did he find her?" she asked Helena. "I can't keep my eyes off her. She's like a magnet."

"Hilary didn't find her," Helena said, thrilling. "I did. I think she's just wonderful to look at; she's like a harvest moon over a cornfield. You don't see anything else."

That, apparently, was also how it took Philip Roscoe. He came in late that evening, but before the end of it he and Evey were talking together as though they had known each other a lifetime. And later on, outside in the King's Road, Phil had secured a taxi for the sisters before Hilary had as much as seen it.

"Now," Helena said to Hilary when they had climbed to the top of their 'bus. "Isn't she wonderful?"

"Who? Evey or Estelle?"

"Both. But I meant Evey."

"Phil seemed to find her charming, certainly."

"Oh, but she is. She's the most wonderful person in the world."

"Nonsense. There's only one really wonderful person in the world — and you know who that is."

Helena slipped her arm through his.

"Yes — you," she said and smiled.

In the darkness her smile seemed to glow, phosphorescent. . . .

3

They paused in their own happiness, these two, to watch that of Phil and Evey. For it grew apace. Evey's visits to the studio became very frequent and were not limited to the usual Saturday evening. Either she arrived with Phil or Phil came rushing in so soon after her arrival that you got the impression he had followed on the next 'bus, seeing her flying before him all the way like an autumn leaf before the wind. At the studio they talked so much that Helena wondered if when they were together they ever left off. She had a fleeting funny vision of them shrieking at each other from tube to tube, rushing noisily and boisterously from one 'bus to another, with Evey looking like a burning flame and Phil scorching himself at it beyond redemption.

Perhaps it was the sight of these things that helped Hilary (even amid this quiet wonder of happiness) to realise how terribly he hated this pretence and make-believe, and how right he had been when he had said that love was a thing for the uplands and sunlight — that you spoiled and smudged it if you dragged it down into the dark and attempted to hide it. Certainly there were days when he saw with a horrible distinctness that the happiness they shared between them was a terribly precarious affair — a thing of tricks and shadows, that depended upon their keeping one person in his Fool's Paradise and upon his behaving "decently" when he emerged. That was still the word they used. *Decent*. That was still how they thought of it.

There were difficult days, too, for Helena — days when she was disturbed by the thought of Jerome away there in his Paradise of Fools where she and Hilary between them had landed him. She could not protest, with Hilary, that he had had his "chance," and had failed. She didn't see it like that. Everything was against her ever seeing it like that. There were times when she wanted more than all else to lead Jerome out of his Paradise, even though she had no better alternative

to offer him than the dusty highway of Truth. And that was a thing you couldn't discuss with Hilary. With something like dismay she had seen that very plainly. A decision once made, it seemed to Hilary a sign of weakness (even with things constantly happening to show that the decision was wrong) to go back and reconsider it.

And Helena didn't agree, so that, even as early as all this, amid their new bewildering happiness, there were crises.

There was the wet evening when after a theatre Evey spent the night at Guilford Street in olden fashion. Mrs. Rogers had lighted a fire and long after Evey was asleep with her happiness Helena had lain watching the flickering shadows on the wall, wondering if, all her life, a room lighted by the uncertain flame of a fire was going to remind her of Hilary and that first meeting of theirs in that deserted house on the edge of the moor. Sometimes, it seems, you grew up in spite of yourself, and thought about things.

You could stand it when it happened to you alone. But there were times when it did not, like that morning Jerome's letter had come, announcing that he was sailing on the tenth of July. Eight weeks that gave them, nine, allowing for the journey, because this was the middle of May. Helena made the hateful calculation over her breakfast and found she could stand it: that same evening she made it again with Hilary and found she could not. Suddenly the thought that had lived with her all day jumped out through her lips.

"Perhaps . . . after all . . . it would be better if we wrote — if we got it over."

There was a little pause before Hilary said gently, "I thought dear, we had settled all that."

"I know, but somehow, now that he is really coming back. . . ."

"Oh, *don't* let us go into it all again, Deirdre darling," Hilary broke out. "Don't think, don't think. . . ." He pulled her up to him, his lips on her hair. "Sweetheart, don't, don't rake it all up again. It'll rub the bloom off. And I want it *not* rubbed off. . . . We've been so happy." He was appalled, somehow, by this sudden unexpected collapse of her — the strong partner in this bid for happiness, the happiness neither of them was entitled to. These things happen. . . .

He pushed up her chin with his own and kissed her drooping, moody mouth.

“Stop being unhappy, Deirdre. It’s a crime — being unhappy when we’re together. Stop it, stop it. . . .”

Her arms closed about him: beneath his lips he felt hers tremble.

4

And there was the Saturday at Kew. . . .

That was memorable for the encounter they had in the tube with Lucy and John and for what came afterwards. Originally it had been a sextette that was going to Kew (Hilary and Helena, Phil and Evey and Ronnie and Pamela, or rather, the first four of them had planned a quartette and Ronnie and Pamela had somehow got added). But on the afternoon the quartette waited on the edge of the crowd at Charing Cross Station for half an hour, and then only Ronnie turned up. No Pamela. Ronnie was sorry they had been kept waiting but the fact was he had picked Pamela up at the Chelsea Town Hall and they had got into a taxi. Half-way down the King’s Road they had run over a dog and Pamela had been sick in the cab, and the driver had been horribly disagreeable about it. Hilary conceded that taxi-drivers were a pampered class, and Ronnie went back to the chemist’s shop where he had left Pamela to recover. So four instead of six people went on to Kew, and Hilary said it was a pity Pamela couldn’t control her stomach better, or at least that she couldn’t control it with more consideration for other people.

“Don’t be absurd,” Helena expostulated. “You can’t help being sick.” And Hilary said, “Pamela can. Also, she can sick when she likes, and that’s a disgusting habit.”

The District, as it always is, was crowded that afternoon and the quartette broke up. Evey and Helena found seats with difficulty, not quite together, whilst Hilary and Philip secured straps and were not to be coaxed by subsequent passengers or threatened by the conductors to give them up. It was a little farther along the line that John and Lucy got in, and even then it might have been all right if the man at Helena’s side had not made room for Lucy, who was genuinely pleased to see Helena, but who said immediately, “Lena. Isn’t that Mr. Sargent

standing just over there?" Lucy had only seen Hilary once before (that afternoon at Richmond not very many weeks ago), but she had an astounding memory for faces and her sharp eyesight was likely to be as inconvenient as her inability to keep a still tongue in her head. Lucy wasn't the only person who knew that Helena had recently spent an afternoon at Richmond with the young man who broke his arm at the foot of Rattenby hill. Before the week was out all these "others" would know that on a certain Saturday in May she had gone with him to Kew.

But it was less Lucy than John who disturbed Hilary when, later, things were explained to him. Because John looked, so Hilary said, as if his sense of duty might be appalling. It wasn't pleasant, somehow, to think that someone else might forestall them with Jerome. At least, it wasn't pleasant to Helena, who thought it mattered mightily *how* we learn things. Hilary thought the only thing that mattered was that you did learn them. He was wrong, of course, but it was not the sort of "wrongness" which brought you peace, because Hilary could never forget that Helena was continually concerned lest Jerome should be ejected from his Paradise at the point of Gertrude or her mother's sense of duty. That was why, on this particular afternoon, he kept Helena there by a bed of some red plant with a "churchy" smell, while Evey and Phil walked on. He wanted to prevent her from saying what he felt she was going to say, and neither of them was thinking at all of the queer plant though they stood staring studiously down upon the tablet that bore its name.

There suddenly, in that quiet place, passion gripped Hilary by the throat.

"Not again, Deirdre, for God's sake. I can't stand it."

They walked on and overtook the others at the Palm House.

"You can walk up to the top, you know," Evey said. She had been to Kew before.

"We will," said Helena, and they went in.

She looked, as they went, just once, at Hilary. That grip at his throat had relaxed. He met her glance and smiled, and as they went up the winding staircase caught her fingers and squeezed them tightly in his.

The afternoon went on wings. There in that place of green

and gold, happiness drifted back to them. It was always like that: nothing for long could prevent their being happy together. Helena sat with her knees tucked up under her chin and that cupped in her hand, staring (under instructions) at a birch tree while Hilary made a colour sketch of her in her queer "modern art" voile dress of uncertain mauve, dotted with lemon and orange bunches of things that looked like cherries and were not. Evey did most of the talking — bright, good-humoured, feministic talk, like silver arrows falling across the golden afternoon. It was all about the women of poets — of Milton, Shakespeare, Herrick, Kingsley, Browning and Tennyson. And about Southey and Wordsworth and the advice they gave to Charlotte Brontë, and how it moved Charlotte to laughter. And about Charlotte herself, and of her and her sister sneaking up to town under cover of their masculine pseudonyms to see their publishers; and about Harriet Martineau pushing her writing under her needlework when visitors arrived. . . .

Once, in the middle of it, Hilary forgot and called Helena by the intimate name he kept for their hours together. He was conscious of Phil's quick glance, of Evey's frank stare (that had bewilderment, wonderment and glimmering comprehension in it), and of Helena gazing fixedly at the birch tree before Phil picked up the conversation from the pool of silence into which it had suddenly fallen. He said, "I don't know if it's struck anyone else, but this conversation's been extraordinarily interesting and extraordinarily exhausting. What do you say to tea?"

They trooped off to look for it, to where, under the trees just past the Pagoda, the white tables gleamed enticingly in the sunlight.

5

But on that day it wasn't only the unfortunate encounter with Lucy and John and that Hilary called Helena "Deirdre." Besides these things there was Ursula Wyatt. . . .

They found her there at the studio when they got back, along with a lot of other people and a perfume of eau-de-Cologne (which meant that Pamela was still engaged in being an interesting invalid). If Ursula was surprised to see Helena

she gave no hint of it, but, of course, she wasn't surprised. Helena was sure of that. Arthur couldn't have kept as quiet as all that! Ursula was in town for a week and Hilary must give her some days. Helena tried not to hear him doing it, but when he took Ursula's arm and walked her affectionately out through the door, something hot and bitter sprang up in Helena's heart. Hilary loved Ursula as he loved Arthur. The roots of this affection went deep. What they thought meant much to him: what they said, counted. . . .

When Hilary came back she plunged.

"Mrs. Wyatt doesn't like me," she said.

"What makes you think that?"

"Lots of things. How should she — after the way I behaved about her invitations? I know it was rude — Jerome used to be so angry. But I couldn't help it. . . . I couldn't bear going there . . . hearing her talk about you — and seeing your pictures. I'd have got over it in time, I suppose, but Mrs. Wyatt got tired of asking me. I don't blame her."

Hilary smiled upon her, touched her hand for understanding.

"But, Deirdre, Ursula wouldn't dislike a person just because she didn't show an overwhelming fondness for her society."

"No, but she might if she showed an overwhelming fondness for yours."

"I think that's unfair, Deirdre."

"I know. But there is — us, isn't there? Mrs. Wyatt knows that, doesn't she?"

Misery sat in her heart, and resentment, that this should be all that was left of her happy day down there in the sun at Kew.

"I haven't told her, Deirdre. I haven't told anybody. Nobody knows anything. Ronnie may have guessed — and Arthur, perhaps."

"Of course Arthur's guessed. And he's passed it on to Mrs. Wyatt."

"Well, and what then?"

"They'll disapprove."

"Not necessarily. And disapprove's the wrong word."

"What is the word, then?"

"I don't know. But not that."

"I can't think of a better."

He looked at her. Her face was hard.

"Dear, they only want to be sure."

"Of me?"

"Of us." He pressed her hand. "Silly . . . silly."

It was their familiar intimate formula. She smiled as he squeezed her fingers up tightly in his own. She tried to see it as he saw it. It was difficult, and yet, after all, Arthur and Ursula would know all about that old story, and how Hilary felt about it, and you might excuse them, perhaps, for their caution.

The hard look died out of her face. But as, with an effort, she began to talk about something else, she told herself nevertheless that now it wasn't only Arthur she had to placate but Ursula. And she didn't — oh God, she didn't want to placate anybody!

6

But far worse than any of these things was the evening of Jerome's birthday letter. The birthday was Helena's — her twenty-fourth — and Jerome had anticipated the event by a couple of days. His letter said little because (though Helena didn't think of this) it wanted to say so much and from it a folded slip of paper fluttered down upon the floor. Helena left it there, lacking the courage to pick it up, for she knew what it was — the cheque Jerome referred to in his letter, that he sent as his birthday gift, and with which he wanted her to buy herself "something pretty." "Something *very* pretty, and don't wear it too often until I come home."

She picked the cheque up presently and looked at it. "Pay Mrs. J. R. Courtney" (so like Jerome, not to leave her her initials — even on a cheque!) "Pay Mrs. J. R. Courtney the sum of twenty-five pounds. . . ." She sat with it open before her staring at the bold signature, Jerome Rutherford Courtney; noting the queer "r's" he made and how carefully he formed his figures, filling up the spaces between the pounds and the shillings with characteristic caution! With the cheque in her hand Helena sat there, motionless, at the window. Buy yourself something pretty: something *very* pretty. She could almost hear Jerome saying it. The memory of his tricks of speech tore bewilderingly at her heart. She had not expected

to feel like this. She didn't want to feel like it. She rebelled against it horribly, and yet it remained. She did not love Jerome: she had never loved him. But he held her — some part of her, not a very important part, perhaps, but she could not wholly escape. Was it the memory of things done between them, things over and past: the physical bond, the daily intimacy that was marriage? Fool, to have forgotten — to have imagined that she could ever escape — altogether!

Later, when she was in bed, the storm broke. She lay there shaken with sobs, and crying — crying horribly, because love waited for her on the mountains and hands that clutched and hurt held her back down there in the valley.

CHAPTER FIVE

1

OUT of her pain one thought emerged. Jerome must be told. The fact was clear and one other — that to mention the subject to Hilary was to call up in his face that look she dreaded, that was apprehension and obstinacy and something else for which there seemed be no name at all.

But beneath it all and around about and above there remained always this sense of throbbing happiness that nothing could destroy, because, besides it, there was just nothing at all that really mattered. Nothing does — when you are as happy as all that.

Other people were happy, too.

Evey, of course (looking more than ever, these days, like a tropical flower), and Estelle, whose luck had turned most unbelievably from the day when Desirée had descended upon the Frampton villa at Streatham and taken everything and everybody by storm. Life sandwiched itself suddenly for Estelle between days which she spent with Desirée at her flat in Maida Vale and days when Desirée stayed at Streatham. Long-haired people (very queer, enthusiastic and excited, according to Evey, who narrated these things) came sometimes with Desirée and prophesied great things for Estelle. Mr. Frampton (poor little man!) did not understand very much of all they said save that his daughter was a genius, and that was a piece of news he found disturbing. The showering of geniuses upon the world was not at all his idea of this business of having and rearing children, and Evey shrewdly suspected that he was beginning to understand that a genius could scarcely be expected to sit at its father's knee and have its head stroked. It seemed to him (again according to Evey, who was entertaining on the subject) that it was so much less important that the world should acquire a genius than that he should

retain a daughter; but Desirée tackled him and talked to him like any brother silk-merchant, with the result that he had given permission for Estelle to go to Germany at the end of the year. Desirée was to arrange everything. All the silk-merchant would have to do would be to write the necessary cheques, but Evey was sure he wouldn't mind that because it made him happy to have Estelle there at his knee, talking of her plans and of how sweet and dear and darling he was. Estelle, so Evey said, always did get what she wanted. She could coax the man out of the moon if she really tried, or the heart from a cabbage. . . .

Pamela was another of the happy people. Here, at the end of May, she was preparing for her marriage with Ronnie in the middle of June. Her conversation was hopelessly entangled these days in chiffons and satins and old point lace. And even if clothes, as a serious topic of conversation, had not bored Helena quite hopelessly, there were other reasons why she had decided that Ronnie's beloved was rather like Thackeray's *Beatrix Esmond*. You liked to look at her, but were rather relieved, on the whole, when you didn't have to talk to her.

Ronnie's happiness went without saying. It shouted at you, compelled you to notice it. He had taken to dropping in upon Hilary at odd times, in the old way that had been so good: and sometimes he brought Pamela (with her chiffons and laces), but either way he must have seen (because Hilary so obviously meant that he should) that he gave him, these days, a Helena for his Pamela. But the times when Pamela did not come Hilary and Helena liked best: Helena because of the chiffon and old point-lace conversation, and Hilary because then he and Ronnie between them could almost delude themselves into thinking that things were the same as ever — that nothing had changed.

2

Helena wondered sometimes (in the way you can, without really caring in the least, either way) whether any member of Hilary's little circle suspected them to be lovers. It seemed to her (if you excepted Ronnie and Arthur, who, even Hilary thought, might have "guessed") at least improbable. She had

grown used to living with this "something" strangely sweet and shy in her heart: had learned to guard her emotions utterly, so that she gave nothing away, by word or look. She had more success, here, than Hilary, for whom there were still times when, with other people present, he simply dare not glance in her direction.

So far, however, and for the most part, Helena found that these friends of Hilary's barely ruffled the surface of her existence. They accepted her and (most of them) admired and liked her, but at this stage it was certainly Hilary they cared for, not her, for whom, indeed, in their busy varied existence they did not seem to have too much room. The qualities for which Helena might be loved lay deep: you had to dig to come at them. Neither Barbara nor Conrad, nor any of these people who shared so much charm and talent between them, cared for digging as an occupation; so that, as yet, few of them had come to know the essential Helena Hilary knew and loved. With Nelly Kenyon it was different. Nelly hated digging, too, but she had the gift of the diviner; she reached down to the things in Helena none of the others so much as suspected. You had, of course, to except Ronnie (who had his odd evenings with Hilary to help him) and Phil (who had Evey). To do him justice, however, Phil had no sort of objection to digging, but only to digging in two places at once.

As for Helena's friendship with Arthur Yeomans, that seemed to have advanced no further than on that first night. The look he had given her, hunting in a corner for hatpins, had killed something between them and created something else. Or so Helena fancied. She had never met him since without remembering that nor without realising that Arthur was not on her side. It was like that she put it to herself. Not *their* side, but *hers*. It was she, after all, who was the intruder.

3

Once, during the week that followed the encounter in the tube, Helena went down to Putney, partly because Lucy wrote to ask her, and partly to see how the land lay. It lay, apparently, not too comfortably. Putney and Wimbledon, ob-

viously uneasy, were joining hands. (For of course Lucy's tongue had wagged as far as Wimbledon.) The Rev. John was very serious and rather tedious. He would ask Helena to be careful — not to endanger her good name, a thing no woman could afford to do. Did she think that this new friendship, in Jerome's absence, was quite "nice"? Wasn't it, perhaps, just a little improper? Helena was amused, scenting the Wimbledon touch, and guessed that the word it had really employed had been "fast." Just a common ordinary flirtation! That, she knew, was just how the thing *would* look to Gertrude.

"Oh, John!" Lucy had said. "You *know* Lena wouldn't do anything wrong, would you Lena, dear?"

This being the sort of question no one likes to answer, because no one really knows, Helena had left it at that. But somehow, she breathed again, not for herself, but for Jerome.

And then, a couple of days later, Edgar called for her at the office and took her down to the Savoy for lunch. The East Rokesby by-election was coming apace, and if she didn't happen to be using it, might he borrow the grey car? Helena never did "happen" to be using it (as Edgar probably knew), and beyond telling him he was welcome to the car she forbore to take any further interest in the East Rokesby election. (Edgar was a Conservative and did not believe that women should have votes.) She did not even ask the date, which, as it turned out, was a pity.

Edgar thought he had better drop a line to Jerome.

"You've his address?" Helena asked. She wanted to be sure of that.

"Somewhere. I know he gave it me. But I'm no good with addresses. Always lose 'em, or forget to make a note of 'em, or something. You see how useful you'd be if you'd only come and help me. Or have you altered your mind?" Helena shook her head. "Ah, well, you may some day. I don't give up hopes. . . ." He stopped hunting through his pocket-book and put it back into his pocket. "No, I don't seem to have it. Doesn't matter, I can send a line via the Halifax people, anyhow. Here, you'd like some chocs, wouldn't you?"

While he went for them, Helena reflected that, of course,

that was where they all had her. They could all get at Jerome "via the Halifax people."

4

Then something happened which made it matter no longer whether they could or not.

It arose, in the first place, through Hilary's taking Helena to look at his picture in the Academy. (That was her way of putting it—as though the Galleries at Burlington House opened daily just to show one little water-colour of a Yorkshire moor. That they did show it, however, certainly justified their existence to Helena.) But the misty colours of Hilary's Haffington Ridge made her sad, created in her that old forlorn nostalgia that converted London once again into an old man of the sea on her back. So on the Sunday Hilary took her down into Sussex. They started early, but the train notwithstanding was packed with people bound for Brighton (somehow there always *are* people bound for Brighton!) and Hilary, who had taken third-class tickets, dashed off to change them, came back abashed at the queue he found at the booking office. Eventually Helena and he squeezed into a carriage occupied by a pair of anæmic lovers and several families who, by the look of it, had combined forces for the day. Hilary and Helena sat opposite each other, wedged in among hot and wriggling children who complained loudly and long because they couldn't see the sea: and Hilary, restlessly glancing at his paper, felt that things had not exactly started well. He asked himself savagely why, despite his "third" tickets, they hadn't travelled "first" and paid excess. (The truth of that, however, was that Hilary hated explaining a situation of this kind to railway ticket-collectors and preferred, on consideration, the discomforts that he knew to the sarcasms he could anticipate.) But Helena, undisturbed, sat tall and straight in her seat, and his heart glowed with the sense of her, and with a wild delight of her rose-pink face. He could smell the faint thin scent of the roses at her waist—a scent that was like Helena herself, sweet and virgin. (That was how he had thought of her first: virgin to the soul, like Diana on her

mountains, chaste and remote, untouched by the passion of love. Save that love had touched her now it was like that he thought of her still.)

The wriggling child who was obsessed by the idea of the sea began again on the theme. "Daddy, I want to see the sea." Daddy, as befitted the male creature, went on with his paper: a fat woman with a baby leaned forward across "daddy" and shook the insistent one by the knee. "Do you think yer father an' me's got the sea in our pockets?" she demanded. "Now jest you shut up, and don't keep all on."

The anæmic girl said suddenly to her lover, "I do hope the taide will be haigh. It seems so much more laike the sea if it's haigh." The pale young man sat a little closer and smiled. In a sort of ecstasy he smiled for several minutes, his eyes on the flying scenery, his hand smoothing out that of his lady, who, too, gazed with an expression rapt and beatific out of the window. And Hilary hated them. There was nothing of the democrat about him this morning. He hated them all—the pale lovers, the overworked mothers and fathers, and the wriggling children—especially the obsessionist, who suddenly created an unexpected diversion by bursting into heart-rending sobs.

It was Helena who offered the despairing one comfort. "You cheer up," she said, "I know for a fact the sea's still there. It always is, you know. You can always depend on the sea. You hang on to that. What do you say to a piece of chocolate? Do you think that would help?"

Hilary understood that the cake of Peter's in the luncheon basket was here being delicately referred to. He got up and raked it out and then tried to be large-minded about it as he watched Helena distribute it among the round-eyed voyagers to the sea. It wasn't only that he had bought it for *her*; he was horribly afraid they would be sick. They gobbled it up in such haste, and he was convinced it was better they should cry than that they should be sick. . . . However, he and Helena arrived at their station before Nemesis descended upon the chocolate-eaters. They left them happily gloating over the last precious morsels; and Hilary, out on the platform, took a deep breath.

“ Good lord, what a journey! ” he said. “ Didn’t it get on your nerves? ”

And she laughed at him. “ I haven’t any nerves this morning, ” she said, “ have you? ”

Out there in the pretty day “ nerves ” was suddenly a very ugly and very sinister word. How could he possibly have nerves when they were going to spend a whole day together in open country?

“ I shan’t have soon, ” he answered her. “ But it was all wrong — in there. I suppose I can’t be a thorough-going democrat because I do so hate crowds and trams and packed third-class railway carriages. ”

“ I don’t see what that proves, ” she said, “ save that you don’t go in them often enough. ”

He put an arm through hers and they took the upland patch together. It was barely half-past eight. Like a white sheet of paper on which they might write what they would the whole day lay stretched out before them.

5

Half an hour later it was not the day alone but the whole world that they seemed to have to themselves up there on a shoulder of the great Downs across which the wind raced, tempering the hot sun. They sat close, and looked out over the coloured counties. Helena’s pink roses drooped now at her waist, and she took them out and held them up to the fierce embrace of the Sussex wind. Hilary watched the delicate petals borne out afar on the arms of the wind. Saw, too, that in the blazing sunlight Helena’s hair was a fire a man might warm his hands at.

“ I must always kiss you when the sun shines on your hair, ” he said. And he did.

It was long after that when she said, “ Read to me, ” and lay stretched out slim and straight, beneath the sun and wind, with her arms above her head and her eyes shut, while he read to her things she knew and things she didn’t from de la Mare, Drinkwater, Gould, Hodgson and (most appropriately) Hilary Belloc. And there was Flecker and Brooke and Frances

Cornford and Lady Margaret Sackville; and Dora Sigerson whom Helena loved.

Thoughts not wholly of the poems, however, came to her as he read, and the realisation that there was about Hilary something that satisfied as nothing and no one else could do. He reached out to a part of her that Jerome had never got within a hundred miles of. Nothing Hilary could say or do would ever alter that. He satisfied her — held her. He could raise and he could cast down. He could make her happy — he could make her miserable. Happiness and misery were bound up now with him. He held the keys. She sat up suddenly and looked at him, watching him as he read. It pleased her that he looked big and “fit,” that, strong as she was, he could pull her bodily up against him from the grass just by lightly gripping her wrists. It was a trick he was fond of, and holding her so he would kiss her, so that even if she wished she could not escape. A hint of mastery here, a hint, too, of the desire to be mastered. What had the feminist in her to say to that? It bowed its head, not in submission but in comprehension. For one was not taken, one gave. One possessed and was possessed. That alone was love and the rest was lies!

6

It was Hilary who suggested, much later, that they should take in Yewhurst village on their way home. He wanted, after the passage of years, to see how the old place looked. It was half-past six when they arrived and discovered that the last London train calling at Yewhurst on Sundays was the seven forty-one. That gave them just an hour in which to look round.

It wasn't, they soon saw, going to be anything like enough. There was so much to see, and some things took so much time.

Yewhurst Lodge, however, Hilary found disappointing. In some queer fashion it had shrunk with the passing of the years. The garden was smaller and the yew trees: the long windows from which he had stepped down to the lawn less wide and imposing. Only the poplars, waving on right and left of them, seemed unchanged and unchanging, singing their eternal song in the breeze.

In the centre of the lawn stood a rocking-horse, painted bright red and striped velvety green, as though its maker had his mind less on a horse than a zebra; and flung over its neck for reins, was a girl's skipping-rope disporting bright blue handles. A swing, built low and with a wooden backed seat, moved idly to and fro. From somewhere in the bushes came the sound of childish voices, and from an upper window of the house a young woman looked down suddenly upon the garden and called to the children.

Hilary and Helena went on, past the house, down the lanes where Hilary used to gather wild flowers with Ursula, and where already the honeysuckle had come to bloom. Up and down the winding road they went, past the open door of the little iron chapel in the valley, through which they caught a glimpse of a tiny congregation singing a dismal hymn exactly one bar behind the reedy American organ accompaniment. Sitting there on the bank Hilary reconstructed for Helena the old story that belonged to it, but it was all so very long ago it had an air of unreality. He had some difficulty in persuading himself that it was not some queer tale he was making up for Helena's benefit. And "queer" was just the word she would have applied to it. Brought up in the respectable atmosphere of the orthodox church, the sterner sorts of nonconformity were practically unknown to her. She had not understood that religion could terrify. There was nothing terrifying about the Prayer Book. It just bored you: sometimes, if you were a woman, it made you angry. Nothing more. The psychology of that little story of Hilary's interested her so much that they sat talking of it far too long — longer, at least, than was consonant with the comfortable catching of the seven forty-one.

As they passed the Lodge again a tall quite youthful somebody was giving a curly headed child a pickaback, with another yelling encouragement at his heels: and the woman came back to the window and stood there with the sun on her hair and a light in her eyes.

"Darling," she called to the youthful "somebody," "I really think they ought to come in. . . ."

And suddenly Helena sat down beneath the neatly-cut box-hedge and began to cry.

That, of course — and Helena's interest in the psychology of an old story — explains why the seven forty-one went without them.

If they walked on to Threppington they'd find (so a sympathetic porter informed them) that there was an eight-thirty "main up," but they'd have to do a steady pace of five miles an hour if they wanted to catch it. Threppington was barely three and a half, and the porter was of the opinion that they'd a very good "sporting chance" if they set off at once and "stepped it out."

But they did neither. For suddenly it seemed ridiculous that they should spend so beautiful an evening hurrying to catch a train when the next day was Bank Holiday, and there was no urgent need that they should catch it at all. Besides, there was going to be a perfectly glorious sunset, and there was a pine wood Hilary wanted to show Helena and which she would love.

"It isn't as though Bletchington will be tearing his hair because of you," Hilary pointed out. "Even he will be taking a holiday. Nobody wants you at all to-morrow — but me. Don't smile. It may be ungrammatical and not very complimentary, but it's true."

It was. It was, in fact, so very true, that Helena did not trouble to deny it. She agreed to let the "sporting chance" (what there was of it) look after itself, and Hilary went off to send a telegram in her name to Mrs. Rogers. His mind was still sufficiently detached from the sunset and the pine wood to make him see the incontrovertible wisdom of that. He wasn't going to spoil things. They were going, both of them, to be proper and decent and careful — damnably careful. He would find a bedroom at some cottage for Helena (because she liked cottages if the windows would open) and book another for himself at the "Loyal Heart." And they'd have their meals together at the inn like any respectable engaged suburban couple. Or hadn't suburban youth got as far as that? Anyway, they were going to be happy — gloriously happy. They were going to have a whole day of it.

He thought of all this while he wrote out the telegram, and

the postmistress, with a languid air, counted the number of words and said the message would cost him sevenpence ha'penny, please. She was a fair young woman with a bored manner, which was why Hilary thought better of his impulse to ask where that airy bedroom might be found and went out to look for it himself. Luckily it did not take him long, and having settled things with the old lady with the apple-ripe face, to whom the room belonged, he went off to the inn.

There were new people at the "Loyal Heart" since Hilary's days, but they were obliging, and with the minimum of interrogation undertook to provide meals for him and Helena on the morrow, and supper that evening if they required it. Hilary decided that they would, and having washed his hands and face in a bathroom tucked modestly away in a corner, as though it hoped nobody would discover it, he went back for Helena.

Later, he sat outside the cottage on a green bank and smoked a pipe, whilst inside Helena was engaged in being pleased with things, and revelling in the prospect of soft water for her face and a stiff brush for her hair. The apple-faced old lady, who did not look at her hands and apparently hadn't heard her name, called her "dearie," and brought her a glass of milk to drink. Upstairs on a snow-white bed she had laid out a night-dress of her own that delighted Helena, for it smelt of lavender and the winds of heaven. She was convinced that the old lady thought she and Hilary were engaged, and that she considered it rather nice of him to take himself off like that to the inn.

Helena drank her milk, washed, brushed her hair and went down to the little white gate of the cottage opposite which Hilary awaited her.

8

They took, presently, the path that skirted Hilary's wood to the top of the hill, where a breeze came to them scented with pine and honeysuckle and the sweetness of wild briar. Already the wood looked dim and mysterious, the pine trees standing up tall and straight against a gold and mauve sky slashed fiercely with reds. It was very still: no sound came at all save for the occasional call of a bird or the scurrying of

some woodland animal. Through the flat pine branches the sunset burned fast to its end, and the wide path that ran down the centre of the wood wandered away into shadow like a dream into forgetfulness. Quite soon now the dusk would fall, covering everything like a blue-grey garment. . . .

Helena watched the shadows steal up almost sullenly over the gold-flushed sky: saw the colder tints creep up and master the mauves and reds, and suddenly she could think of nothing save that here night would come marvellously — like a purple passion flower, and that before it came she and Hilary would have to turn and go back down the hill. Care! Care! The chill word was like some poor ghost shivering before them in the evening air.

They stood there on the edge of things, holding their breath, and feeling, as they had felt all day, that they had the world to themselves, that nobody else was alive at all. The blood raced headlong in their veins; they could scarcely look at each other because of it. The spirit of adventure, of daring, stirred about them like the blue night, and they knew that they might be as careful and as “decent” as they chose without altering that in the least.

Behind them, down the white road, a grey motor-car ran swiftly towards the village. They did not look round. The way was clear and the driver did not disturb the quiet with the sound of his horn. But in the car sat a man who never missed a feminine figure with the least pretensions to grace. Helena's white frock on the dark edge of the wood caught his eye and held it. And evidently not the frock only, for he smiled and nudged the woman at his side, who turned and followed his gaze with her own. They sat there, the two of them, as if petrified, craning their necks to stare back at that couple standing, with clasped hands, on the edge of the wood.

And as they stared they saw Hilary slip his arm about Helena's waist and draw her more deeply into the shadow.

9

On the following morning there was the car again.

To Helena it was not a car at all, but a sleek grey beast, a sleuthhound tracking them down. For this time she saw it.

They were emerging, she and Hilary, from the porch of the "Loyal Heart," and her arm was tucked into his. They had just finished breakfast and had come straight out into the sunlight as they were, hatless. It took Helena just a second to take it all in — Edgar driving, and Gertrude sitting straight and stiff at his side, with a motor-veil of green floating wide in the morning breeze like a banner. The colours of Edgar's parliamentary party floated with it and suddenly Helena understood, cursing herself because she had not asked Edgar where East Rokesby was and the date of its by-election. If Edgar had told her these things she had not listened. Well, now they had seen. Appearances were dead against her. She knew Gertrude. Gertrude would be certain to imagine the worst. *The worst!* Something somewhere in Helena laughed softly at that: something else said: "Oh, what does it matter? They've got to know some time!" And she didn't care. For herself she didn't care a scrap and she wasn't going this morning to think of Jerome. Neither was she going to remember that Gertrude and Edgar and all of them could always get at Jerome (and at her!) if they wished, via "the people at Halifax." . . .

Up there in the woods Hilary began to make a sketch of her on the fly-leaf of his Book of Modern Verse, and every now and then as she watched his happy face as he worked she wondered what he would say if he knew — that, which she knew. But she wasn't going to tell him — at least, not yet, because it might spoil their day, and it was so tremendously important, somehow, that their day should not be spoiled.

10

They got back to the studio that evening at half-past seven, because Hilary was expecting some remnant at least of his Crowd. At half-past seven, however, only Arthur Yeomans had arrived. Helena left him and Hilary talking together and went into Hilary's bedroom to wash and tidy her hair. Through the closed door she could hear voices, one low and, as it seemed to her, admonitory, the other a trifle querulous and excited. Brushing her hair there before Hilary's oval glass her mouth hardened. They stood, she and Hilary, on the

edge of the crag, and though it made them dizzy they could preserve their balance, could stand there looking below. Arthur would imagine they could not: doubtless it was something of this sort he was saying now to Hilary. She flung up her head in fierce pride of her own strength. Arthur knew nothing. And the die was cast. Nothing that he could say was going to make any difference. Let him talk. . . .

She twisted up her hair in the loose way Hilary liked best; twitched her frock into position, wished it were fresher and opened the door. And then the end of what Arthur was saying hit her like a blow between the eyes. She stood still for a moment, with the handle of the door in her hand. Neither of the men saw her there. Arthur was sitting, cross-kneed, on the settee, his eyes on Hilary, who stood with his back to Helena, his elbow on the mantelshelf.

“My dear boy, don’t talk rot. You know you can stop it if you like.”

And Hilary said in a voice Helena scarcely recognised, “I wish to God you’d tell me how. . . .”

She made a sudden noise with the door and came forward. From a long way off she heard Hilary asking her if she felt refreshed, and then he disappeared and she was sitting at Arthur Yeomans’s side talking politely of God knew what.

CHAPTER SIX

I

GERTRUDE moved quickly. Her note inviting Helena to dinner came on the Wednesday morning, and it read, Helena thought, very much like a command to Buckingham Palace. She was not so much invited to dinner as threatened with it, and the scolding she was going to swallow with the meal rose up out of the heart of Gertrude's curt little paragraph and stared at her.

It happened just now that Mr. Bletchington was at a German spa, whither he had betaken himself for rest and reduction, so that there was no reason why Helena should not have left the office in time to go home and change her frock. (These things mattered at "The Laurels.") But Helena would not go home: she would go to her lecture, but she certainly was not going to dress for it.

The meal was a queer one, with the conversation going on stilts until Gertrude's trim parlourmaid left them with cigarettes, a pile of fruit and a silver dish of chocolates. In the little pause that ensued, Helena helped herself to a cigarette and lit up with aplomb. "I thought you hated smoke," Gertrude said and was mystified by Helena's cool "I do, but I've learnt to smoke in self-defence." Truth to tell Helena was beginning to enjoy herself. She found that the situation had its humour, especially with Gertrude kicking off for the proprieties and peeling herself an apple whilst she did so.

Gertrude was very angry, very scornful and definitely threatening. But she achieved nothing and after a time she rose in her wrath and left Helena to Edgar.

"I give you up," she said. "Perhaps, Edgar, you can make her see reason."

He didn't. But then he didn't try very hard. He started wrongly, of course, by changing the subject.

"You know I'm 'in,' Lena?"

Lena did know that. She had read as much in her *Daily News* that morning. Her brother-in-law was "in" by a majority that had made her despair of humanity, as though she was coming to believe, with Phil, that politics counted. . . .

"I'm returning Jerome's car to the garage to-morrow," Edgar went on. "It's been no end useful. You were a good sort, Lena, to hand it over. All the same, I can't think why the devil you don't want to use it yourself."

"I think Fownes cured me of my passion for motoring," Helena said. "Motoring for Fownes meant records and short cuts, the edges of ponds and angles of forty-five degrees. It gets monotonous after a time, you know."

"Then why don't you get the car out and learn to drive it yourself?"

Helena threw down the stump of her cigarette and smiled at him.

"Do you know, Edgar," she said, "you sometimes have quite brilliant ideas. I believe I will — if I can find time."

"Does Bletchington keep you busy?"

"Yes, rather."

"Other people, too, eh?"

"A few — yes."

Pause.

Then, "I say, Lena, may I ask you what Bletchington gives you?"

"No, you mayn't, but I don't mind telling you. Two-fifteen."

Edgar got up and came and sat on the table, very near her.

"Look here," he said, "come to me. I'm going to be horribly busy for the next three months. If Jerome gets through and is back before then we can fix something up with him. He won't mind, I know, and I'll give you two-fifty a year."

Helena gasped, though she managed to look as though she hadn't.

"Two-fifty," she said. "That's nearly five pounds a week, isn't it?"

"Exactly £4 16s. 13¼d. Or £20 16s. 8d. a month."

"Very tempting. But I think I won't take it on, thanks."

"Well, think it over. We'd like to have you here."

Helena smiled. "You mean *you* would?"

Edgar grinned and put his hand on hers, lying white and smooth on his polished dining-room table. The Holmeses dined with lace mats under their plates and no cloth, because at the moment cloths were not fashionable.

"Well, you know, kiddie, I'm awfully fond of you. Always have been — right from the first time I set eyes on you."

She was very still, keeping him at bay with her eyes. He went on.

"That's why I want you to be careful over this other affair." He came back to it with a rush — seemed to realise that Gertrude had left them that he might make Helena "see reason." He could have found pleasanter ways of spending that interval together. . . .

"The trouble is, kiddie, that Gertrude may take it into her head to write to your mother — may conceive it her duty, I mean. Though what good that would do. . . . You see, they're both so attached to Jerome."

Helena's eyes narrowed.

"You mean," she said, helping herself to a chocolate, "that probably they may conceive it their duty, between them, to write to Jerome."

Edgar said, "Well, you never know. It's just as well to be careful. It was a mad thing to go and stay at Yewhurst that week-end of all others, with East Rokesby only a couple of miles or so away. Surely I told you the date, and if I didn't there were the papers. Not that I look at it as Gertrude does. I don't see why a woman — a pretty woman, like you — shouldn't have her fling as much as a man if she wants it. What's a kiss or two, after all? He's a lucky devil, anyway, who gets your kisses. They're so damn scarce."

He bent down so that his moustache brushed her hair.

"Do you know," she said, "they're going . . . to get . . . scarcer."

"Are they?" he said.

She could feel him about her like an atmosphere — knew that he kissed the top of her head. She sat very still. Her hand lay supine there on the polished black oak. She heard him breathing heavily above her; got, through the tobacco smoke, a whiff of the scent he affected. Something inside her said: "What am I doing? Is this flirtation?" Then Edgar's hand descended upon hers and the spell was broken. She slipped out of her seat and pulled her hand free.

"What about that coffee?" she said, "And Lucy tells me you've got a new Orchestrelle. Come and play something to me. Got any Chopin?"

Edgar hadn't. With his hand pressing the soft flesh of her finely moulded arm he offered her Beethoven and Tschaikowsky as a substitute.

The trim parlourmaid had just taken in the coffee to the drawing-room. It was black and served in pale mauve cups. And while Helena admired the excellent colour-scheme and enjoyed the coffee which helped to create it, Edgar moved some queer little levers on a shining black grand and produced a not altogether faultless rendering of the *Sonata Appassionata* and, later, the *Sonata Pathétique*, for the Orchestrelle was new and as yet Edgar's manipulation of the levers was a trifle amateur. He pulled up, however, on the Tschaikowsky: gave her, quite creditably, the *Chanson Triste* and, afterwards, the *Casse Noisette* suite.

It was in the middle of the *Casse Noisette* that Helena lighted her third cigarette and hoped devoutly that she wouldn't be sick.

CHAPTER SEVEN

1

JEROME must be told.

That thought pursued her, because if she did not write Gertrude would. Gertrude meant business, and it availed Helena nothing that she could manage Edgar because Edgar (here, and so obviously) could not manage Gertrude. And, like all the others, Gertrude could get at her "via the people at Halifax." . . .

For all that, however, she did not write until quite a week later. She funk'd it as much as all that. And when she did write she took her time over it, drafting it out in shorthand first, because one's thoughts came quicker that way and one could net them before they escaped. The letter when it was finished (even to her own eyes) was a remarkable production, cool, concise and exact. It offered no excuse for what had happened, took no credit for what, so far, had not. (If they expected Jerome to be "decent" at least they could be "decent" too.) But you could not for ever fight against love: you ceased to try when once you had recognised love for what it was — a thing powerful, despotic and beyond reason. As she copied out her letter in longhand she remembered that Jerome (though he might at first have rebelled) had always in the end done what she wanted. This was a thought that comforted her, when, with the letter posted, she began to wonder how Hilary would take it. Because Hilary knew nothing about it. Remembering that look on his face that was obstinacy and apprehension and something else that was nameless, she simply had not been able to tell him.

2

He took it, as it happened, quite admirably, because now it was over and done with. That was what mattered — that noth-

ing should come between them and their hours together in the sun: that they might take them and be thankful, forgetting Jerome hundreds of miles away in his Paradise of Fools. It had almost seemed as if at times that might not be — as if there were something in both of them that made it impossible, something ineradicably Puritan, fastidious. . . . And now it was over and done with, this thing that came between, so that relief surged up and lapped them round. Up through the bright June days their love burned as in some marvellous second blooming.

The week that followed the dispatching of the letter was one of clear skies and sweet scents; of summer winds; of walks abroad in Surrey and in Bucks; of evenings on the near reaches of the river or on the tops of 'buses that went to St. Albans or Epping. They were so happy together that sometimes fear trod shadowily upon their heels, padded along behind them. It rose up out of nothing, terrifyingly, when they least expected it.

There was, particularly, the Saturday evening when Hilary's friends were late and he and Helena had drifted into a Brontë talk after a rereading of Mr. Walter de la Mare's *Henry Brocken*. They had found themselves talking, incongruously, of Emily Brontë, who loved life so well she clutched at it to the last. You couldn't bear to think of it. . . . And Hilary had said, "I shall be like that. I shall just hate dying. I should hate it at a hundred."

"Surely," Helena had objected, "one would be glad to die at a hundred."

"I shouldn't, Deirdre."

"But the poor old patriarchs in the Bible — old and full of years. Weren't they glad to die?"

"I'm sure they hated dying."

"No, what they hated was getting old. Emily Brontë was spared that, at least."

"It isn't getting old that matters, Deirdre. It's dying before you're old . . . before you've *lived*. It's hideous to think of the way those Brontë girls were sacrificed — one after the other — wiped out, when they wanted to go on living. There ought to be a prayer said in the churches, for those who go to 'em, for those who die young."

"So many of them," Helena said, "all those who die on the battlefield."

"I know: it's horrible."

He came over and took her in his arms, suddenly, and with passion, as if yielding to an overmastering impulse. She lay there white and silent, envisaging with him, as the measure of their common passion, the very heights and depths of misery. He felt her shudder up against him, her body seeming to cling to his, her eyes shut, their white lids trembling. The minute passed. He smiled at their folly and stroked her hair back from her forehead, kissing her lips till they smiled in answer.

"Death," he said, "is something that happens to other people. I forbid you to talk of it."

3

Helena had dispatched her letter on a Tuesday, and they judged that it would reach Jerome on the Thursday of the following week. It was on the evening of that day that Hilary began his new picture of Helena as Deirdre. It was so he had seen her first, and the idea born then in his mind had grown steadily since the day he saw her with her hair down. There was so much of it and he loved its colour — gold-brown like an October morning. He would bury his face in it and had been miserable a thousand times because the picture could not be begun immediately. And once he had quoted St. Paul to her: "*If a woman have long hair*" . . . and had felt her pull herself laughing out of his reach. "I detest St. Paul," she said. He had laughed, too, and told her that so did he, but that for once the little Jew was right. Long hair *was* a crown and glory to a woman, even though it was St. Paul who said it.

"Anyway, you look like a picture by Waterhouse. May I say that? And the picture of Deirdre will knock Waterhouse and 'La Belle Dame' into a cocked hat."

He had gone on talking about it all the time she stood there like a queen, with flushed face and glowing eyes, fastening up her hair again.

On this particular Thursday evening the picture kept them occupied a good deal, so that they did not think overmuch about Jerome and his letter.

4

Two days later Pamela and Ronnie were married. It was a fashionable little function, conducted with all due and necessary ceremony and perhaps a little that wasn't, and it has a place in this history only because of the effect it had on Helena and Hilary.

Afterwards they would have it that it was the wedding which had done it. Undermined their defences, they meant, which was very strange, because standing there upon their crag they had been so certain that that sort of thing could not possibly happen to them. But even Hilary would have admitted something additional to the wedding. There was that not altogether inexcusable mistake on the part of somebody (a feminine somebody) who had a disconcerting habit of jumping to conclusions, and not only of jumping to them, but of turning her back on them immediately, so that it never seemed to occur to her to reconsider them. This particular conclusion, as it happened, was concerned with a wedding-ring. Not Pamela's, but Helena's. . . .

And, anyway, it was an incident which came later on in the day.

5

Helena found the wedding exactly like all the others she had attended (only, as she said, "rather more so") save that for some inscrutable reason she remembered afterwards that Pamela looked beautiful and interesting while Ronnie looked a fool. Hilary said there was nothing queer about this: that all men looked fools on their wedding-day and most women like lambs led to the slaughter, only in this case it wasn't Pamela who would be slaughtered. All the same, she was very beautiful to look at: not a man there who would not dream dreams about her. She was all gold and white and delicate and exquisite. Outside in the porch small children in Kate Greenaway frocks threw roses at her and succeeded in hitting Ronnie each time very neatly behind the ear. Helena's sense of the funniness of things struggled up and made her hope the roses had no sharp thorns. Other children, less "official," perhaps, but with considerably better aim, hurled confetti in riotous

handfuls. Pamela tried to dodge the confetti and hurried into the taxi. A Press photographer rushed forward and deftly secured a snapshot, just as she smiled from the open window — a smile that wiped Ronnie out completely, poor, foolish-looking Ronnie who sat hiding in the corner, rubbing his ear, as if the roses did have thorns, after all!

After the ceremony, a reception at the old Chelsea house Ronnie had taken for a year. They listened to too many speeches (Hilary refused to make one, just as he had refused to officiate for Ronnie, who had had to fall back upon a suburban brother, who, however, thoroughly enjoyed himself); they drank Ronnie's champagne (which was excellent) and ate Pamela's wedding cake (which was excellent too, if you liked that sort of thing); and presently they looked at her presents, a really fine haul, which made Hilary congratulate her upon her business ability. Nothing else, he told Helena afterwards, could have produced such a completely satisfactory collection with so few duplicates. But Pamela took his remarks in good part. She was essentially an amiable person. "Everybody," she said in that honey-sweet voice of hers, "had been so very kind . . . so *very* kind."

For long afterwards Helena had a vision of Ronnie's face as he shook hands with Hilary and said good-bye. He said it three times, as though it were a sort of lesson he had learnt by heart and must not forget, and his eyes searched all the time for Pamela.

She came — clad in a dark green costume, with a black hat sporting an egret's feather. There were no silly humanitarian scruples about Pamela. She knew, none better, what suited her! "Come along, Ronnie," she said, "we shall miss the train." She did not intend to do that. Pamela was one of the people to whom fiascoes never happened. She had the air of one who knows that she is perfectly beautiful and perfectly dressed, and she was as self-possessed as if she had been through the marriage ceremony every day of her life, and intended to make it henceforth a permanent institution.

After Pamela and Ronnie had gone Hilary proposed that they should all go somewhere and "do" a *matinée*. But everyone was too much in love with Ronnie's beautiful old house and the idea of drinking tea in the old garden out of Pamela's new

silver service to listen to him. So he and Helena went off by themselves. They walked, however, not where matinées waited to be "done," but, almost instinctively, in the direction of Hilary's studio. And as they went he talked of Pamela — not too kindly, Helena thought.

"If only he hadn't *married* her," he said presently.

"But he *wanted* to marry her," Helena objected.

"I wonder if he did. He wanted *her*. She's in his blood. And marriage, with Pamela, is the only way. She has a rigid technical morality a man can't get beyond."

"What do you mean by a 'technical' morality?"

"Do you know Dr. Johnson's definition of a flirt?"

She shook her head.

"I don't remember it, anyway."

He quoted it for her.

"*A woman who rouses passions she has no intention of gratifying.* Oh yes, you can change the gender, of course. But that's Pamela. She's moral enough, if that's all you mean by 'morality.'"

"I don't," Helena said, "but I wonder if you're right?"

"Right? About Pamela? Of course I'm right," and he told her things which did seem rather to prove it.

"You can see, can't you," he asked Helena, "that a girl like that isn't good enough for Ronnie?" She said yes, she could see that, as he put his latchkey in the door and let her in.

"Did you tell Ronnie these things?" she inquired, as they went up the staircase.

"I tried but it didn't do much good. He said Pamela couldn't help it if men made fools of themselves over her, and he could understand it, anyway. Besides, he didn't want, he said, to marry a woman no other man would look at."

"Oh, well, perhaps he'll never find her out," Helena said. "Are you going to work?"

He said he was, but when she came back in her Deirdre frock he only sat there looking at her in it. Barbara Feilding had designed and made it up for him over a year ago. She had clever fingers and a good eye for colour, and Hilary had been pleased with the gown, but for some reason or other he had not used it for the purpose he then intended; and it had hung about

in his room until the projected picture of Helena as Deirdre had brought it again to his mind. It was a greenish-blue silk of heavy texture, with a design of old gold, and a girdle that hid rather than defined the waist-line. Barbara had cut it with a large square neck and short loose sleeves, and had left it so long that it trailed as Helena moved. In his picture Hilary had posed her so that she stood with one bare foot slightly forward, peeping out from beneath the blue-green hem.

"It's a nice gown," he said, "but I'll have to paint some more colour into it. It used to seem to have plenty: your hair takes it all."

However, he didn't paint that morning. Something got in the way. Something stretched between them — some live wire of feeling they knew they must not touch, and presently Hilary turned from the mixing of his paints to say "Let's go somewhere, shall we?"

"All right, if you really don't want to work. Where?"

"What about our wood?"

"Our wood? Oh, our Yewhurst wood. Oh no, not to-day."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"You do know, Deirdre."

"Only — that I'd rather not."

"Afraid?"

Her eyes rather than her lips said, "Yes."

"Of me?"

"Of us."

He saw her hands gripping the edge of the divan and her hair fall over her face like a russet veil. But she did not push it back: it saved her from that fiercely tender glance of his: though nothing could save her from the overwhelming sense she had of him sitting there at her side.

"It doesn't strike you, I suppose," he said, "that it's just as dangerous — to-day — to stop here?"

Out of a deadly calm she answered him.

"Yes it does. I think it's always going to be dangerous — now, anywhere."

He turned at that, caught her tightly in his arms and began kissing her as though he would never stop. Beneath Barbara's

thin silk gown he could feel all the soft, enticing warmth of her. Her hair fell about him intoxicatingly. The blue-green gown slipped on one shoulder. . . .

When he released her she got up rather unsteadily and moved over to the door of his bedroom.

"I'm going to get this off," she said, looking down at the unwanted Deirdre gown.

"And you'll come — to the wood?"

She flushed a little under his deliberate, ardent gaze, but she nodded.

"Yes," she said.

He saw the door close between them — heard the key turn sharply in the lock.

6

He found her a scratch lunch of cheese, tomatoes and fruit, and after they had eaten it Hilary went out to look for a taxi and to send a telegram to Mrs. Rogers (one of the many she received, these days). The taxi landed them at Victoria in good time for the two thirty-five. They would have to change, they were told, at a place called Threppington, and were promised a connection. They said but little during the journey, but once Hilary said suddenly, "Think of it, Deirdre! Doesn't it make your mouth water? A whole month — together — in Italy."

He was thinking, she knew, of Ronnie and Pamela, who had chosen Italy for their honeymoon, and she could find nothing to say.

"They're going to Florence — then on to Capri. I could make you love Florence and Capri, Deirdre."

"You could make me love the Mile End Road," she said, "if you tried hard enough."

He smiled at that and was silent. For the rest of the journey they spoke scarcely at all. Only, their eyes meeting sometimes across the narrow width of the carriage seemed to speak of a mutual emotion, deep and voiceless, and something white and hot flamed between them.

And then, as though it scorched her, the red colour would come up swiftly into Helena's face.

They missed the connection at Threppington—as one always does miss connections—by just a few minutes. (Besides, missing trains was a trick of theirs.) There was nothing to Yewhurst until the five-fifteen, so they set out to explore Threppington, which looked promising.

They went together up the winding sunny road until they found a birch wood, and beyond it a blaze of gold that Hilary said was Threppington Common with the gorse in full bloom. They sat down, by a mutual impulse, not in the wood, but on the common, amid the clean nutty smell of the gorse, and Helena's eyes wandered slowly over the Sussex country that lay sleeping and dreaming beneath the hot sun of that mid-June afternoon. Away to the south a line of already yellowing fields rose steeply to the blue belt of the sky; and on the top-most ridge clumps of straggling firs made queer dark patches against the horizon. All leaning slightly forward, they had about them a curious air of vigilance, as though they kept eternal watch for something that would some day ride out from the sea up to them there on the ridge of the hill.

But Hilary would have nothing to do with the roving Sussex country. He was in no mood, he said, for painting. He was going to lie down out there in the sun and go to sleep. Helena opened her book and tried to read, but all the time she was conscious of those seemingly closed eyes that watched her. She felt strung up, intense; out there in the open it was almost unbearably hot. No breeze stirred. All the world flagged and drooped in the great heat that scorched her neck as she sat. She took out her handkerchief and folded it across the nape, tucking the edges beneath the collar of her frock. The hat she had thrown off she now put on again, tilting it forward over her eyes. She looked at Hilary lying bareheaded, the sun pouring down in a hot stream upon him; and suddenly she called to him.

“Do let us find some shade. This is awful!”

“I don't want to find anything,” Hilary replied. “I'm extraordinarily comfortable.”

“You know you're not: you can't possibly be,” she said. She sounded irritable. That was how she felt. The sun on

her back was like a scourge. She got up, crossed over to Hilary, took the handkerchief from her neck and spread it over Hilary's face.

"You'll be ill," she said, "it's much too hot even for me."

His lips moved beneath the strip of linen. "And why should I be ill because it's too hot for *you*?" he asked.

"You know what I mean."

"Do I? What's the matter, my incoherent Deirdre?"

"Nothing — except the heat. I can't stop here. I shall be sick if I do."

She saw his mouth move again beneath the linen and knew that he smiled — saw it, with strange pain, for just a second, like a fleeting shadow on a drawn blind.

"Don't," he said, "that's like Pamela. Don't be like Pamela, Deirdre."

She said nothing, but moved away and picked up her book. A fierce sharp anger against him sprang up in her heart as she went on over the long grass in the direction of the wood behind where Hilary lay. She did not go far. Just inside the wood she stopped and flung herself face downwards upon the ground, cooling her hot face and sun-soaked body in the fresh grass. She felt giddy and a little sick, and she was disturbed by that little sharp flame of anger which kept darting up and down within her. She lay very quietly, listening to the hum of the insects busy out there in the sun: to the song of the birds in the wood that, save for them, was so still. There was a peace unfathomable in the birch wood but in her heart there was no peace at all. She lay there longing for it to come back, longing for the familiar friendly intercourse between herself and Hilary — a thing of quiet calm and dignity, with all the hot fierce things that looked at her now shut down beneath a surface of everyday interest and friendship and the dear delight of companionship. But it wouldn't come back. It was gone for ever. She knew that there was going to be no getting rid of this new turbulent element that had ridden roughshod into the heart of their calm and for ever stopped its beating.

Down there in the wood the fierce things stared and stared. . . . *It's always going to be dangerous . . . now. . . .* Face downward in the grass she looked long and steadily at that fact, and found it rather terrible. Presently she sat up from the

grass to look at it better, to see it, as it were, from a new angle, and as she looked it seemed to grow less terrible. It became part of life — part of her life. And life, for all you understood nothing of its riddle, was somehow good. She throbbed and ached this afternoon with her absorbing passionate love of it.

After a while she got up from the grass and sat with her back to a tree, where she could watch that prone figure out there in the sun. The nutty scent of the gorse and the damp sweet smell of the wood, were all about her. She sat with her hat off, her head back against the tree-trunk, her book neglected on her drawn-up knees. Her eyes never roved from that quiet figure lying out there among the Sussex gorse, with his hat propped over his eyes and her handkerchief over his face.

Gradually the hot anger died out of her heart. It seemed impossible presently that it could ever have been there. A new strange sense of understanding, incomparably sweet, stole down to her there amid the birch trees. And presently it crept up, like a shadow, into her watching eyes.

Half an hour later he came to her — scorched and reeling from his sun bath.

“Angry?” he asked.

“Not now.”

“You were? What killed it, Deirdre?”

“My anger? It was only a little one.”

“But something did kill it?”

“The wood, I think . . . and all the things a wood makes you see. One understands, somehow, in a wood.”

“I know. What has this wood made you understand, Deirdre?”

But she wouldn't answer that. She only looked at him with her quiet shadowed eyes, and a wistful smile sending her red mouth aslant.

“I suppose,” he said, after a while, “you've no idea why that idiotic wedding should have upset us?”

She clung to the sound of his voice rather than to what it said — as if she struggled in seas too strong and Hilary's voice was a raft, upon which, with care, she might manage to effect a landing.

“Has it?” she murmured.

"You know it has. Why won't you look at me?"

"I am looking at you."

"No you're not. You're looking through me."

Her head bent so that he had only the top of it for his moody eyes to rest on.

"Aren't you envious?"

"Of Ronnie and Pamela?"

"Who else?"

"Of their happiness, you mean?"

"No — of their freedom to take it."

"Oh, don't," she said, "don't. . . ."

The conversational raft floated desperately away without her. She could find nothing at all to say because she saw how it was. He, too, had suffered: had known that longing for freedom that had come to her. And she had thought that, in that way, he had not suffered at all, had striven so hard to hide the signs of her own suffering from him that she had almost succeeded in wiping out for herself the memory of that evening of misery — that long sobbing in the dark for the thing that never could be, the unblocked path, the inviolate body and soul. . . .

She raised her head and looked at him. He saw the shadow in her eyes and her quivering mouth, and compunction smote into him. He leaned towards her yearningly.

"Forgive me, Deirdre. . . . I'm a brute."

Balancing herself on her hand she leaned over and kissed him, very quietly, on the lips. Remembering her eyes and her mouth he restrained the sudden desire that flooded him, managed, somehow, to keep his hot hands off her.

"Don't let's be — like that," she said, "wanting everything — when we've got so much. Can't we wait?"

He said he could. They both said they could. They meant it. They were really quite honest, and decent. It was only that Fate, with loaded dice, was playing heavily against them. . . .

They had tea presently in an inn Hilary knew. It had a ridiculous name and a fragrance about it of mingled lavender and roses. And while they had their tea Hilary was suddenly

smitten with an idea. "Why shouldn't we stop here, Deirdre?" he said, "instead of going on to Yewhurst?"

Over the rim of her cup Helena considered Hilary and his idea, and she smiled because she liked the one almost as much as the other. So when the charming-looking girl in the green frock who had served the tea came back with the bill, Hilary inquired if they had any rooms. Could the "Honey Pot" (that was its ridiculous name) put them up for the night? The "Honey Pot" could, and the girl in green inquired if they would step upstairs and look at the rooms. But Hilary and Helena (with the call of the open sounding loudly in their ears) rather thought they would not be bothered. They wanted two rooms and the best there were. And could they have dinner at eight?

Afterwards Hilary said it was that dreadfully casual manner of his, but Helena said she was sure that hadn't anything at all to do with it. What had made that nice girl jump to her conclusion was not at all that Hilary said "Oh, Sargent," when the girl asked, "What name if you please, sir?" but that the girl had a really well-developed power of observation. In fact, that explanation seemed so ridiculously simple and reasonable that they never quite understood why, until the thing had happened, the possibility of its happening had occurred to neither of them. But the simple fact is that it did not. They came back at a quarter to eight to find it staring them in the face — *un fait accompli*.

9

It was Hilary who stared at it first because Helena had gone along to the bathroom in search of soap and water, and Hilary had said, "It's all right, don't trouble to come up," to the green girl who had encountered them in the hall and offered to show them to their rooms.

"Numbers 18 and 19, sir . . . on the first floor," and, to Helena (who had inquired after her precious bathroom), "On the same floor, madam, right at the end of the passage."

Even that dreadful "madam" didn't warn them.

So, while Helena splashed about in cold water, Hilary faced the tremendous Surprise of it alone. He turned the handle of Number 18 and stood looking at it blankly. For Number

18 was a sitting-room, and on an old oak-table dinner was set carefully for two. A big bowl of roses stood in the centre of the table, their scent mingling delicately with the odour of lavender that seemed to cling, like a vestment, about the old house. The windows were flung wide, letting in a scented surge of evening air.

But even then the thing didn't dawn on Hilary. A mistake, of course. He went back and looked again at the number on the door. That, certainly, was 18. Hilary frowned and turned the handle of the door adjoining, which was plainly Number 19.

And Number 19 stood instantly revealed as a bedroom. It was extraordinary how in a small fraction of time the details of that room stamped themselves upon Hilary's mind — the two single black-oak bedsteads set side by side, the big double-mirrored wardrobe, and the washstand with beautifully carved legs; the armchair of black leather, with deep blue cushions that matched the curtains at the open window, or the evening sky beyond it; the two water-colours on the wall that, even in that moment, his brain registered as "good"; the bowl of roses at the side of the farther bed, and above all, Helena's little attaché-case standing in one corner with his satchel and sketch-book placed intimately and wonderfully on top of it.

It was that last little item that brought the truth down upon Hilary with a rush. He stepped well into the room and remained there staring around it, incapable of thought or of action.

"Oh, good Lord!" he muttered, "good Lord! What a mess!"

10

In at the open door there floated the merry sound of the splashing and running of water, mingled with the cheery rattle of plates below-stairs and a chatter of voices. As if to shut them out, Hilary pushed the door up close and moved to the open window, where he stood looking out across the quiet country, flanked by the downs like a line of blue guards, and with the distant woods mere patches of duskiness against a sky of rose and opal. From the bathroom came still the splashing of water and the sound of Helena's happy voice chanting an old song to a modern tune of Brian's.

*The morn is merry June, I trow,
The rose is budding fain. . . .*

The song came dancing along the corridor, and even in that moment Hilary thought that Brian's melody was bad — that it didn't go well with the words.

*But she shall bloom in winter snow
Ere we two meet again.
Ere we two. . . .*

Oh, I say, how nice of them, a *tête-à-tête* dinner! ”

The voice stopped outside the sitting-room: the song began again inside it, whither the sight of that neatly-set dinner-table had intrigued the singer.

*He gave his bridle-rein a shake,
Said “Adieu for evermore,
My Love,
And Adieu for evermore!
Adieu for. . . .”*

The song broke off. Hilary guessed miserably that the numbers outside there on the door had incontinently strangled it. Turning, he saw Helena standing in the open doorway, her level brows drawn together in a frown of bewilderment, her white teeth pressing down her lower lip. Neither of them spoke. He watched her taking in, as he had done, every separate item of that oaken room; saw her gaze come to rest at last upon the moving sight of her own belongings set down there in that absurdly intimate fashion with his, and then transfer itself slowly, and with a deepening of her frown, to her hands.

The light broke. She came into the room, half-shutting the door behind her, the colour in her face, her eyes on Hilary's.

“Of course,” she said slowly, “they think we're married.”

And she stretched her hands forth to Hilary, who wouldn't take them, who wouldn't even look at her properly, who kept repeating, “Deirdre, forgive me, forgive me! I'm a fool — an idiot. It simply never occurred to me!”

And Helena — a new, superb, marvellously calm Helena — said quietly:

“Do you suppose for one single moment that I thought it had?”

Presently she sat down, not in one of the armchairs — armchairs, somehow, were not for occasions of this sort — but on the edge of the nearest white bed. And Hilary shut the door and looked at her as she sat there gazing down at her hands that she would have him believe were the cause of it all.

“Look here,” he said, in that quick almost insolent manner of his that meant tremendous excitement and “nerves,” “I’d better go down and explain.”

Helena looked up from the twisting of the compromising ring on her finger.

“To that nice girl?” she said.

“Oh damn!”

And then, partly because (for all the calm of her appearance) she was nervous and strung-up, and partly because the situation, after all, had its element of humour, a smile trembled crookedly across her mouth.

“I’m afraid it will be very awkward,” she said, and knew that her smile had annoyed Hilary before he snapped out that he couldn’t for the life of him see that the situation was in the least amusing.

“I’ll go and find that confounded girl at once. There’s nobody here. . . . They’re certain to have another room to spare and we can stick to the sitting-room. You’d like to do that?”

She felt suddenly stupid, as though Hilary’s petulant little outburst filled her mind to the exclusion of all else.

“Do what?” she asked. “Oh, the sitting-room? Yes, let’s stick to that.”

“For God’s sake,” Hilary said, “do try to stop thinking this is funny.”

“But it *is* funny, you know. It really is.”

“Then God help me, I can’t see it,” Hilary said in sudden passion.

Helena said nothing. Her faint smile was quite dead, and like a tide the colour had drifted out of her face. She looked suddenly white and wistful, as she had looked in the wood, as though with the painful death of her smile tears had come near to birth. An immense contrition for the second time that day chased the anger out of Hilary’s heart; his face softened. He

came towards her, stooped to pick up her limp hands from her lap and began to kiss them.

"I'm an irritable beast," he said. "When things go wrong I'm hateful. To everyone. To you, too, and that's awful. One day, darling, you'll hate me so."

She neither looked at him nor spoke: her hands at his lips seemed cold and unresponsive. He dropped them back again into her lap.

"This sort of thing," he told her, "gets on my nerves."

She looked at him then. "Sit down here," she said, "I want to talk to you."

She laid her left hand invitingly on the white bed where she sat. The ghost of her dead smile struggled bravely up again and looked faintly at him out of her eyes. Her mouth — with its new wistful expression — was the only piece of colour in her white face. He thought she looked adorable — beautiful in some new fashion he could not wholly comprehend. He worshipped her and yet he could be hateful — abominable — to her. He came miserably and sat down at her side on the edge of the little white bed. He didn't touch her: several inches of white coverlet gaped hungrily between them. What she said startled him. It may, even, have startled her.

"Dear. We've got, some day, to do this, haven't we?"

"Do what?"

"This. Let people think we're married."

"We're not going to let them think it. I'm going down to find that beastly girl."

"But that doesn't answer my question, does it? There won't — ever, will there — be any other way than this?"

He shook his head.

"None."

She sat, now, very upright, playing no longer with the band of gold on her finger. She had the air of one who has made a quick decision and faces a situation boldly. Her eyes gazed not at him but at the opposite wall.

"Well, if it's got to be intrigue . . . deception . . . of a sort, it won't be any better, that way, will it, in three months' time?"

He said, not in the least seeing where she was taking him, "It won't be any *different*, if that's what you mean."

"It is," she said. "We're quite certain, aren't we, that that's the only way there is?"

"For us?"

"Yes. The only way out."

"Absolutely."

The white coverlet continued to gape between them: even now, by a huge effort, he kept his hands away from her. But he looked at her, wondering faintly at the way she was taking it; not interested, somehow, in the way she was taking him. He only wanted to rush out, take that absurd girl by her green-clad shoulder and abuse her for the presumptuous idiot she was. Pain and fury contended together within him, and in the background lurked something stronger far than they, that he kept his hand on — that struggled beneath his grasp like a mad dog. . . . He wondered desperately how much longer he could keep it under. And then Helena spoke.

"Supposing?" she said, "that we don't bother that nice girl?"

He turned and looked at her, but her eyes still stared at the opposite wall.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Don't you understand?"

"No."

"I should have thought you would. It's very simple."

Her eyes had forsaken the wall for her white hands in her lap. He saw the colour creeping stealthily up under her white skin and though his blood leapt he made no movement to bridge the distance between them. Still with determination he kept his hand firmly on that mad dog of a feeling struggling furiously to be free.

"I don't find it simple," he said.

Suddenly, as if she realised that he didn't intend to help her at all, she turned her head and looked at him. He saw her shining eyes and the colour drifting up like mad in her face, and he thought she must hear his heart beat. But she heard nothing at all save the beating of her own.

"If they like to think we — are married," she said, "why shouldn't we let them?"

The look she bent on him staggered him — the strangest, most wonderful blending, it seemed to him, even in that mo-

ment, of pride and humility. He came nearer to her then, putting out a hand, shy and tentative, to touch her.

"You're sure you'll never regret?"

Most wonderfully she smiled at him.

"Neither of us," she said, "is ever going to regret anything . . . whatever happens. Isn't it appalling to be as sure of a thing as all that?"

For a moment their eyes met, but as she felt his hands upon her, her eyes closed, the proud head lowered.

"Deirdre," he said, and then, in a sudden rapture of joy and sorrow. "Oh, my dear, my dear, why do you cry?"

12

So the girl who jumped to conclusions never knew how wrong, this time, she had been.

She brought them their dinner presently, and she thought they must be tired because they were so quiet. But speech, somehow, was now superfluous. They had, each of them, the air of a listener, as though their silence was a thing more eloquent than any speech and much more wonderful.

There was a hush, too, on the outside world. The June evening dropped slowly. The young moon had long since gone to bed, and every time Helena looked out of the window she saw just a sweep of sky, sapphire-blue, and the rounded outline of the summer trees dark against it. There was no sound at all cut there beyond the soft cooing of doves or the occasional shrill cry of the heron.

The girl who did not know how wrong she had been, suggested coffee in the garden. She brought it to them there, and they sat over it until the sky deepened and the white stars came out, and the garden was only a blurred indistinct mass stabbed at intervals by the bold spire of the larkspur. But it smelt divinely of syringa and tobacco plant and the lemon-scented verbena; and the trees dreamed and dreamed 'twixt sleeping and waking.

Down there amid the scented darkness Hilary pulled her sharply up against him and gazed searchingly into her face. He saw it white and mysterious against the blurred beauty of the garden, so utterly loving that it hurt him to look at it. It

stabbed into him there in the darkness — a thing he had not known any face could do. He crushed her suddenly and fiercely in his arms, felt her body tremble to his, and knew she was his, not for the asking, but for the taking.

With a new tenderness he kissed her, beneath the dreaming trees and the white-starred sky. He kissed her many times.

13

Presently they went in, crossed a dim hall where the proprietor nodded over his paper but woke up to ask Hilary to sign the Visitors' Book. Helena watched him do it: saw him write in his straggling untidy handwriting, "Mr. and Mrs. Hilary Sargent."

Then, on up the broad oak staircase to the door of room 18. Here they paused, their hands touching over the handle.

"Deirdre, the boats are burned. Do you realise that?"

"They were burned, weren't they," she said, "a long time ago?"

The look they gave each other there on the threshold was one of almost terrible tenderness. Nothing like this had ever happened to anyone before in the world and would happen to no one again. Their faces were full of this sense of the grandly solitary: exaltation had them both by the throat. He leaned to her there on the dim landing, his lips against her hair, his voice thrilling.

"I adore you . . . I adore you."

He saw her face, radiant, for just one second before she slipped past him into the room.

She undressed slowly in the dark, and then sat curled up in an armchair by the window, gazing out into the blue-black night that was warm and still and scented.

Half an hour later Hilary found her there, a white figure with shimmering hair.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I

SOMETHING joyful and buoyant awoke with Helena next morning. She lay searching her mind, turning it inside out, looking for remorse and finding nothing but this tremendous inordinate sense of happiness. She could not get away from it. You can think of nothing else when you are as happy as all that.

The morning was beautiful. All the rest of her life she was grateful for that, because this was England and it might so easily not have been. She swung herself over the edge of the bed and crept softly to the window. The room looked on to the garden — a country garden, planted closely with all manner of old-fashioned English flowers — sweet-williams, candytuft, white pinks in massed profusion, mignonette, wall-flowers, pansies and the earlier roses. It was the sort of garden Helena had known all her life, and it reminded her this morning (though this was summer and that was autumn) of her first morning with Jerome, when they had sat together at breakfast, looking over just such another garden as this. Michaelmas daisies had grown in it and marguerites, very tall and straight, and bronze nasturtiums over a flagged path. There had been, too, one red rose, full-blown, and at her breast she had worn violets — Jerome's violets, that he had found in some sheltered spot in a wood. And in the night it had rained, so that the morning was green like an emerald. . . .

Her thoughts went echoing and re-echoing along the windy corridor of the past, and she stood there at the window listening to them. She could bear to do that, because for the moment she was lifted high above all doubts and qualms, bereft utterly of theories. You do not argue or theorise about a feeling of this sort. Even in the bright light of that June morning — so utterly passionless and virgin — she regretted just nothing at

all. She was pervaded, wrapt about, with a sense of peace and assurance, and understood nothing save that one gives oneself for love or one does not. And she had. Because she believed in love, because she always had believed in it, even when she had accepted so many other things in place of it.

Hilary still slept, lying high on his pillows, with tumbled hair and more colour in his face than Helena had ever seen there before. Turning about from her survey of the early morning pageant, her eyes fell upon him and remained there. Something new and unfamiliar stirred within her as she looked at him lying beneath her warmly intimate gaze. She was conscious of new wonderful things coming to birth within her, and was uplifted by a tidal wave of unexpected emotion, compounded of a hundred things that as yet were nameless. In that moment of terrible insight she had a grave sweet sense of the everyday: of the quiet ways of love that are companionship and understanding. She saw love suddenly as no mere passionate noctivagation, but an illuminant, that swept like a searchlight into the far corners, where custom, tradition and a miserable morality of possession still held sway.

Another thought came to her — without panic, almost without emotion. Jerome, by now, knew the truth, or a good deal of it. They had not bargained for this. And “this” was recorded downstairs in the Visitors’ Book in Hilary’s untidy handwriting.

After all, they had not been “decent.”

She was sorry for Jerome — quietly, sanely sorry. It was a feeling this morning devoid of the passion that had torn and clutched at her a fortnight ago. She looked at it now as she looked at her happiness — with the calm unperturbed gaze of the person who has chosen and does not regret. There was no help for it. She and Hilary were in love with each other, and that they had no right to be in love made not the least difference in the world. That, sometimes, was the way of love.

For all that, however, the shadowed June garden slipped away as she looked at it, and another, coloured by the hand of October and moist from the passage of the rain, came up in its stead. Tall, white marguerites, bronzed nasturtiums over a flagged path, and one red rose, full-blown. . . .

2

Dressed and ready for the morning she yet hesitated, with her hand on the door-knob, looking back at the room where she had been so happy, with its black oak furniture, its blue curtains, the plain white walls they had had the courage (save for those two water-colours) to leave blank; and the deep bowl of roses, some of which had fallen in the night, and had made a futurist pattern on the floor.

The roses most of all, perhaps. For years afterwards when out of the past that blue-black room was to rise up and look at her, it was always Hilary's flushed face on his pillows, and that splash of vivid colour down there on the black floor, that she saw first, and there would come to her then that queer tantalising scent of mingled roses and lavender.

3

Downstairs the girl in green wrestled with a collection of bolts and catches in her interest and let her out into the morning. She walked straight on down the road; crossed the first stile she came to and went on through the fields, growing thick with sorrel, ox-eyed daisies and buttercups. She liked this southern county, with its chalky soil, its rolling open view of hill and dale, its great line of downs and the faint suggestion you had all the time of the sea. Helena walked, too, with the seeing eye, so that even this morning her ramble was less subjective than it might quite reasonably have been.

For out there in the beautiful morning her happiness persisted. Nothing troubled her. It was as if her brain had yielded up its functions for a while, so that the deadly knife of analysis it had controlled was stilled at last. Life had ceased to be either placid or comfortable: but was suddenly a thing of daring and adventure. She flung up her head at the challenge of it, that old line of Browning's floated back to her. *One must be venturesome and fortunate. What is one young for else?*

4

At breakfast there was wonder and ecstasy between them — no sense of culpability, none of embarrassment. Fair and pure their mutual passion burned up and up between them like a white flame, destroying the very heart of wrong and of shame. . . .

Afterwards they went out together up the winding road that crept past orchards cool and green, down into the birch wood and out again on to the gorse-covered common. And all the morning Hilary worked at his water-colour of Helena in her queer mauve frock and behaved as though, on the whole, he was pleased with it. But after lunch he put it out of sight and took Helena down again into the wood.

Like a thing loth to depart, that goes with reluctant feet, looking back longingly over its shoulder, their great day slipped away from them.

And the scent of the gorse was entangled in Helena's memories of it — inextricably mixed up with that other of roses and lavender. . . .

5

They went back to town by the eight-thirty — the train they had refused to hurry for a fortnight ago, and in London was nothing but a maze of wet streets and a devastating scarcity of taxi-cabs.

And in Helena's room a telegram, bearing Saturday's date and wearing the belated forlorn expression of the telegram that has found you out and must await your coming. Helena frowned at it, thinking that telegraphists wrote a vile hand. With brisk unconcern she broke open the envelope and ran her casual careless glance over the message it contained. And the message was

*Arrived Liverpool this morning expect me Guiford
Street four.*

Jerome.

CHAPTER NINE

1

LATER, when she looked back, there seemed to be a great gulf between what came after and that moment when she stood with Jerome's telegram of Saturday in her hands, knowing herself grateful in profound measure to the gods who were forcing immediate battle upon her, while her blood raced and her courage leaped from the plunge.

It was in the night that she realised that Jerome had come back knowing nothing whatever — that he could not possibly have received her letter before he started off by the early boat. There were other things, too, that had not yet occurred to her. During the night and early morning they began to descend upon her — chill, ominous things, separate and distinct, falling about her like snowflakes, and as silently.

Even so, she had not known how wretched she was until she was nearing Charing Cross station and saw Jerome, with a face like morning, waiting there for her outside the Bureau de Change.

2

Another blank after that, filled up with some horror of a meal at which there was chianti and small talk, and a wish at the bottom of her heart that she were dead. . . . And after that a taxi ride to Guilford Street, tears at the back of her eyes, a strange lump in her throat and the thought climbing out of her wretchedness that Jerome was like a schoolboy home on holiday. Another thought, too, when he kissed her, that it was horrible to be caressed like this by two men, as though, in some dreadful fashion, her body no longer belonged to her. And once she thought: "I can never tell him — never. How did I ever imagine I could?" But she knew that she must, because, instantly, there arose before her a horrible vision of

herself journeying back in the grey car to "Windward"—of herself in Jerome's arms in all the dreadful terrifying intimacy of their common room facing the outstretched moor. And then another wiped it out—a vision of that other room down there in Sussex, with fallen rose petals, a riot of colour, strewn out upon a black oak floor, and Hilary's face lying flushed and high on his white pillows. Strength came to her then, so that she made the abrupt terrible effort of despair.

But even as she spoke she hoped that Jerome would be angry, because one suffered less if one could get angry. Anger was like love—it burned up everything else. All the same, it was less what she said than the sight of her blanched and twisted face that stabbed furiously down into Jerome's understanding. Things blinded and frantic rushed past him into the dark, stabbing at him afresh as they ran. And, all the time, Helena's voice relating a ridiculous story. . . .

"I know it all sounds like comic opera, but it's true. . . . I can give you the address . . . All the evidence you want."

"Comic opera," Jerome said, "Oh, my God!"

She remembered very little of anything after that. All those things he said to her, all those things she said to him, were best forgotten. Later, the ridiculous outrageous things he said about artists made her smile, but to-day and for many a day to come, only one thing remained with her. *Jerome was not going, after all, to be "decent."* Resolutely and unflinchingly he refused altogether to be "decent."

Presently he rose to go, and the spectacle of Jerome looking for his hat remained with Helena for ever. It had fallen from its chair and lay face downwards upon the faded reds and greens of Mrs. Rogers's carpet. Helena saw it, in that moment, in all its pathetic funniness—the hard felt hat of the masculine creature, the "bowler" that is neither dignified nor reasonable.

"You will know where to find me when you want me." Jerome's voice, cold, dispassionate, reached her from the doorway. Her own, faint and spent, trailed after him, like something wounded to death. "I shall not want you—ever. Good-bye."

The door closed. He went. She heard his footsteps going along the landing and down the stairs . . . heard them stumble

a little at the awkward turn that met them halfway down, knew that they recovered and went on steadily into the passage and along to the front door. That opened, shut, and the footsteps went on down the road. And when they died away there was nothing at all save that one thought — that Jerome was not going to be “decent,” that resolutely, obstinately, he had refused, point-blank, to be “decent.”

CHAPTER TEN

1

STRANGELY enough, it was Hilary who pulled her out of her swamp of misery into the delirious happiness of the present—a Hilary who was determined, at this juncture, to see neither past nor future. His overmastering need of Helena just then (their overmastering need of each other) wiped out everything save itself and the opportunities for being together that came to them.

Not that opportunities came entirely without effort on the part of the lovers, who, to be quite accurate, dragged them along to them by cunning manœuvres that included subterfuge and evasion. Intrigue strode with boldness and startling suddenness into their lives, making itself so useful that they almost forgot how much they hated and distrusted it. For it was just then (or that was how Hilary seemed to see it) the one friend they had, the one friend in their confidence, who neither passed judgment nor called them to a consideration of things irrevocable between them. Not, of course, that Hilary's friends were going to do either of these things. The people who were going to make a fuss were all on Helena's side. Sooner or later the fight would begin: but it had not begun yet, and it struck Helena (playing this queer game of secrecy because Hilary would have it so) as a little superfluous to don one's armour-plate to meet people who came unarmed.

From that Tuesday evening when Helena had gone on to the studio from the office with her news of that interview the previous day with Jerome, Guilford Street had known her no more. Just before the telegraph offices closed Hilary had rushed out and sent Mrs. Rogers a lie across the wires. That was Intrigue's first move in the game. The second came when on the following day Helena called and elaborated the telegram that lied. These things can be done, and Jerome's visit on the Monday evening to Guilford Street helped considerably.

It was, of course, quite natural that Helena should be rejoining her husband, and, besides, Helena did it all extremely well. She told her lies so boldly that she was convinced only some inscrutable accident had prevented her long since from embarking upon a life of crime.

In due course her boxes arrived at Hilary's studio, and were pushed well back beneath his bed and locked against the prying eyes of people who came to clean.

So the secret was born. They tended it continually and nursed it with care, so that it did not cry overmuch nor disturb them o'nights.

They were convinced, by the end of that first wonderful week, that no one suspected its existence — not even Evey or Arthur, whose eyes and ears were sharper than most people's.

But Helena would not have cared if they had.

2

By the end of the next week Arthur had. . . .

He came in on the Friday evening and he exhibited no sort of inclination to depart. Eleven o'clock struck and Hilary, finding an excuse to follow Helena into the kitchen, told her to put on her things and say good night as if she were going home. "Don't come back before twelve, and by that time I'll have got rid of him. Go and have some coffee at the "Kindly Heart"—unless you can think of anything better.

"You really want," Helena said, "to keep it up before Arthur? You won't let him think what he likes — or tell him the truth?"

"Dearest, I can't. . . . Not yet. We've got to wait. . . ."

She shrugged her shoulders but she smiled a little sadly, knowing that he was thinking of Jerome . . . that he believed they would beat him at his own game. That was because he did not know Jerome: had not realised yet that Jerome Rutherford Courtney did not "fail," that he did not recognise failure even when he looked into its chill blank countenance. But Helena knew these things. And she smiled, not because of them but because of Hilary's optimism, which she had not expected, and because one does smile at optimism when one meets it.

So Helena put on her hat, collected a book, wished Arthur good night in an excellently natural manner, and went out. She turned down on to the Embankment in the direction of the "Little Restaurant of the Kindly Heart," where she and Hilary often went together and sat in a dim corner and were happy. You got good coffee at the "Kindly Heart," and, not infrequently, good company; but this evening it was almost empty. There was a young man sprawling in an armchair a few tables away, and even in the execrable light of the little restaurant he was audaciously mauve as to shirt, pink as to tie and open as to socks. He was talking what appeared to be sociology of sorts to a young woman in a rakish hat, whose contributions to the conversation — more audible than those of the gaily-coloured young man — reached Helena in sudden breathless bursts.

"The middle-classes? Oh yes, I agree . . . hopeless . . . of course . . . Anti-everything we care about. . . . Look at the suburbs. I hate them, don't you? Oh yes, fresh air and all that, *but*. . . . Just look at the young marrieds! What are you going to do with them? They will live in flower-boxes, with white paint and polished brass, and babies with heads like the floor of a carpenter's shop. . . . They go to church on Sundays and they vote straight Tory every time, like the snobs they are. So will the women when they get a vote. You can't blame the Liberal Government for not giving it to them: they know they'd be swamped, of course. . . . What are you going to do with people of this sort? They won't think. That's why I hate them — because they won't think. . . . How are you going to alter them? I s'pose that's what you want, isn't it, to alter them — somehow?"

In the other corner sat a couple of lovers eating macaroni and cheese between prolonged intervals of holding hands beneath the table. When the voice of the lady with the rakish hat reached them they smiled at each other, rather, Helena thought, as if they were sorry for her. Helena wouldn't have wondered if they were sorry for the whole world, including herself — who certainly looked lost and lonely away there in her own particular corner.

She ordered a coffee: spun it out until half-past eleven and then ordered another. The macaroni lovers had long since

departed, and at five minutes to twelve the sociological young man and the rakish-looking young woman got up to go. They squabbled a bit over the bill until finally the young woman secured and prepared to settle it. "Oh, no, this is *my* do. . . ." The young man got back to his sociology. The young woman having disposed of her change, stood up and put on her coat. "London," she said, as she passed Helena's table and flung her a look, "London, of course, ought to be burnt down."

"But it looks quite nice at night," the gaily-coloured young man objected. "Come out and look at the stars."

The association of the stars and this fierce young woman somehow made Helena smile. She was still smiling when the manageress of the "Kindly Heart" came over and said, "We close at twelve. Two coffees wasn't it? Sixpence, if you please."

Helena paid her sixpence, remarked that it was a fine night, and departed.

Outside there was a sky sown thick and palely with stars, amid which a moon, like a white disc pushed slightly out of shape, seemed to ride serenely. A wind, soft as down and warm from the throbbing heart of June, went dancing gaily along the Embankment, over which Helena leaned for a while, hearing only the faint rumble of a distant train, and the quiet lapping of the tide.

It was at least a quarter-past twelve when she let herself in and went up to Hilary's rooms. Without knocking, she turned the handle and walked in. And there, just exactly where she had left him, sat Arthur Yeomans, puffing at his pipe.

"I had to come back," she stammered, "I couldn't get home. . . . I left my purse. . . ."

Arthur got up, with the air of one who has not waited in vain. Or did she only fancy that?

"I'll be off, old chap, he said to Hilary. "Coming down?"

They went out together.

"He knew all the time," Helena thought, "that's why he waited. He wanted to make certain."

She slipped down on the rug before the fire and pulled off her hat. She sat there listening to the sound of their footsteps that went down to the door, passed out on to the step and halted there. The sound of voices — muffled and indistinct — came

to her as she sat there, hearing the soft crackling of the dying fire. . . .

She was tired and sleepy — an ecstasy of weariness that promised dreamless sleep. She yawned and began to take the pins out of her hair. It fell over her face, and without pushing it back, she sat on, watching the red glow of the fire through the glinting mass of it.

3

Hilary came in at last, pulled the blue curtain over the door, shot its little brass bolt and slipped down beside her.

Something of her sleepiness slid from her as his arm came round her.

“Well?” she asked.

“Guessed,” Hilary said, his lips on her hair.

“-Oh, I knew that. I meant, how did he take it?”

“As I always told you he would. Arthur hasn’t the mind of a Baptist. He’s broad. Doesn’t see how we can do anything else if we’re as sure of ourselves as I assert. And we are, aren’t we?”

“Surer,” she said.

“He wanted to know just where things stood — with Courtney. He suggests I run up to Rattenby, the sooner the better. Thinks he might be amenable to reason now that we’ve really taken the law into our hands. What do you think? Any good?”

Sitting with her head on Hilary’s shoulder she had to stifle the “No, none at all” that was on her lips. What she did say was “You can try.” She made a wry face. “But it’ll be horrid.”

“Think he’ll shoot me?”

“He’s much more likely to ignore you.”

“And you think it’s worse to be ignored than to be shot?”

“I fancy it must hurt more.”

He laughed, holding her close, kissing her mouth through the veil of glinting hair before she broke away.

“Let’s look up trains at once,” she said.

There was, they discovered, a twelve-five from King’s Cross which Hilary could catch quite well on the following evening

when the Crowd had departed. It would reach Halifax about six on the Sunday morning, and if there was no connection to Rattenby he could, so Helena said, who knew all about this sort of thing, quite easily charter a car to run him out. It rather amused her, she found, to reflect that Hilary might arrive at "Windward" in a grey "Courtney."

She lay awake that night long after Hilary was asleep, thinking of Hilary's journey and the futility of it. Because Jerome was *not* going to be "amenable to reason." Let Arthur think it if he liked. . . . When she thought of Jerome nowadays she was angry. She had been sorry for him, but that had passed. Anger had eaten up her pity; she had been right — anger left no room for anything but itself. Something in her had hardened queerly. Of herself, she was very sure. She had done Jerome a wrong, but he, too, much earlier, had done her a wrong that seemed infinitely greater. He had married her knowing that she did not love him. True, she had not then loved anybody else: but there had, surely, always been the possibility that one day she might. She had not then properly understood that, but Jerome was many years older than she, and he must have known. Working it out for herself, these new strange days, that was the conclusion at which she had arrived. That Jerome had known and she had not. It cut somehow, at the very base of their union. Somehow or other, it didn't, to her, seem honest. . . .

He must have lived with it all that first year — that ugly spectre of her potential lover. And now that it was no spectre but the lover himself who had appeared, Jerome shut his eyes and refused to see. That, too, didn't seem quite honest. More courageous than Jerome, she faced the situation and stared it out of countenance. She believed that in the circumstances she and Hilary were justified. There was no sense in finding excuses for oneself, and she simply was not able to understand how this life with Hilary was wrong when that with Jerome had been right. She just could not see what marriage — the mere civil formality — had to do with it, and it was incredible to her that a man should want to keep someone who did not want to stay. What was it worth if that was all love was — just possession, the staking out of a claim? Love wasn't possession, nor just emotion: not desire nor sentimentality. Love

was understanding, and freedom and mutual respect. It was the dew on the morning, the stars in the evening sky. . . .

She remembered what Hilary had once said to her. "More nonsense is talked about love than about anything else in the world. Think of our plays, our novels, our poems, even! Yet how many people, do you suppose, ever fall in love?"

They had worked it out between them to a miserable percentage. Not one in fifty, they agreed. Most people did without the dew on the morning — did not look at the stars o' nights. Neither of them would have included Jerome in their miserable percentage that did. Neither of them was in the mood to call — that — love.

She fell asleep presently, her head on Hilary's shoulder, her face against his, one arm thrown across him and her hair a spread delight in the white rays of the moon.

4

The next evening was wet — outrageously wet — so that only Jimmy and Nelly, Barbara and the Grettons turned up. Jimmy was spruce, elegant and cheerful, despite the rain (he had probably arrived in a taxi) and he rushed in and shook Helena affectionately by the hand.

"Fancy meeting you, Mrs. Courtney. . . . Made sure you were back in Yorkshire by this time. Ran into your husband one day last week — Monday, I believe it was, anyway, we had lunch together — and he told me he was dragging you off that very evening. . . ."

She escaped after a while to Nelly, who sat back against Hilary's cushions listening to what Stella Gretton was saying. Nelly looked tired. She told Helena that that was how she felt. She had just had an offer of marriage and had refused it. Saying "no" firmly yet gently, it seemed, was a terribly exhausting business. "You see," she said to Helena when Jimmy came up and began to be amusing to Stella, "you see, my dear, the man's poor — rather a darling, of course, but miserably poor — and I can't cook. You know what Mrs. Berry says: *Kissing don't last: good cookery do.*"

"You couldn't learn to cook, I suppose?" Helena inquired.

"No, I'm quite sure I couldn't, Lena. If it were a case of

love's young dream, I might. But it ain't, my dear: it ain't even anything remotely approaching it. Ten years ago I might have gone to live in villadom with an easy mind. But now it would annoy me to hear my neighbours sneeze, and they wouldn't approve of me because I don't believe in cleaning steps and shouldn't take a pride in my door-knocker. Suburban ideals are beyond me. Always were."

"Can't one live without the approval of one's neighbours?"

"Not in Suburbia, my dear."

"But out of it?"

"You don't have neighbours anywhere else. And no Mrs. Grundy. It's only in Suburbia you have to frame your marriage certificate and produce your banker's pass-book."

"Hilary wouldn't agree with you."

"Hilary? Oh, but Hilary's not in love, so he needn't worry."

"Don't you think he *has* been in love — ever?"

"Oh yes — in love with faces or heads of hair. But Hilary wouldn't marry a face or a head of hair, thank God. Sensible people get over that sort of thing. I remember being in love once with a nose — a really beautiful nose it was — and another time it was a mouth that Rossetti might have painted. On the whole, however, I'm inclined to think it was the nose which gave me the worst time. Good noses are so rare. We needs must love the straightest when we see it."

Helena laughed.

"You got over the nose, did you?"

"I got away from it — which comes to the same thing. God was very good to me."

Somewhere in the house a clock struck ten.

"Nelly," Helena said suddenly, "do something for me, will you?"

"Anything," said Nelly, "short of a murder. A murder would be as exhausting as matrimony."

"Get rid of everybody for me, will you?"

"Oh, a massacre," said Nelly.

"Don't laugh. It's serious. They must all be gone by eleven."

"You think they look as though they're going to stay later?"

"Well, look at Barbara and Stephen. They're talking to

Hilary about that new man — Gaudier Brzeska, isn't that his name? Hilary's awfully keen on him, but all the people he draws seem to me to have at least six things physically the matter with them. And I'm sure they've all had rickets in their childhood. Hilary agrees, but says that doesn't prevent him from admiring them — *as works of art*. Do you understand that? I don't. Anyway, Hilary's forgotten our existence. I don't see what is to prevent them going on for hours."

"And they mustn't after eleven? What's on?"

"Nothing, except that Hilary has a train to catch."

"He's not going away? Don't say he's going to shut up in June?"

"Oh no — this is only a flying visit to Yorkshire."

"I thought he'd given Yorkshire up. He used to go up there two or three times a year. He had a perfect passion for Yorkshire. I never saw anything like it. Suddenly he stopped going altogether. I used to think there might be a girl in it."

"The Brontë sisters," Helena murmured.

Nelly laughed. "By the way," she said, "isn't Yorkshire your county?"

"It was," Helena admitted.

"Was. Aren't you going back?"

"No."

Nelly looked thoughtful. "You seem pretty final about it, my dear," she said.

"I feel final about it," Helena said. "Let's go over to the others, shall we?"

Barbara and Hilary smiled at them abstractedly. But in five minutes talk about Brzeska had languished and died, shocked out of existence by Nelly's persistent and cavernous yawning.

"You ought to go home," Barbara said. "Anybody with any sense of decency would — and pull the blinds down. You're as depressing as Hamlet playing Malvolio."

But with Brzeska shelved they began talking quite generally about books, the plays they had seen lately, the music of Moussorgsky and the dream-theories of Professor Freud. Those, they found, convicted the lot of them of pronounced "thwarted tendencies" to criminality, but for some reason or other they were not, any of them, particularly interested in

themselves as potential criminals, so that it was, on the whole, a dull evening.

And, regarding the empty room at five minutes to eleven, Helena reflected that Nelly was really clever.

5

They had supper and they washed up (together, because only in very special circumstances did either wait upon the other). The simplicity of Helena's new life, after the complications of that domestic machine at "Windward," after Mrs. Rogers's exhausting tussle with the things of the house, amazed her continually. So many houses had the trick not of being possessed but of possessing. They "got" you body and soul. Your whole life, if you were a woman, became one long devotion to them. You offered them incense day and night: you could never escape. Even money, here, did not seem to help: certainly not if you cared overmuch for the things that money could buy. And most people did, so that the more money you had the more intricate life became. And if you had no money it was nothing but a sordid drudging. Hilary and Helena, balanced happily between these two extremes, wondered sometimes which was the worse. To-night Hilary was even magnanimous. He did not omit to remember that, as washer, it was his duty to attend to the sink and bowl, even though he knew this evening that he could so easily have got out of it.

Back again by the fire he held her presently in his arms, as if for no train on earth could he let her go — seeing, as she did, nothing at all but that one blank night and day, that looked like a century.

"I think, even now," he said, "that you ought to come."

She couldn't think why she wouldn't — some queer idea that he ought to be free: another, more queer, that she must learn to do without him; and still another, that she would not be dragged at his heels, an erring wife, pleading for mercy, consideration. . . . It was not, somehow, her pride but her sense of humour that forbade her.

"I'm not coming," she said, lifting her face to his. "And you must hurry. You've not a minute to spare."

But when he had really gone, and the grinding gear of his taxi had faded out into the other massed and indeterminate sounds of the night, she felt suddenly cold and spiritless, and when she got into bed she could not sleep. Outside the wind still hovered and the rain lashed the window-pane. A clock in the house struck midnight, and she thought of Hilary's train steaming out of the station into the cavernous tunnel that yawned for it immediately beyond. But in the morning he would see the dawn over the moors. She knew so well the aspect of the moors after a night of rain — the white clouds heaped riotously by the hand of the wind; the patches of bright blue in the stooping sky. A procession of Yorkshire names filed rapidly through her mind, places she knew and loved, to which earlier that evening she had said she would never go back. And on top of them came another list of places — places that Hilary knew and loved and which, as he had said a thousand times, he wanted to see again with her. Bruges, Brussels, Antwerp, Paris, Florence, Rome, Capri. . . . And suddenly she understood what it meant to him, and why he wanted it. Because, at this moment, she wanted, above all things, to stand up there on Rattenby moor with Hilary, watching the red sun come up behind Haffington Ridge.

In the big bed she grew intolerably lonely. She slipped out and opened the door. There in the studio the unseasonable fire still burned, and in its warmth, stretched out in slumber on Hilary's blue rug, lay Mark Antony — an ecstasy in ebony. She stooped, picked him up, and stood for an instant with his black body against hers, white-gowned; and in the fire golden on both. She snuggled him close in her arms and took him back with her, and Mark Antony, whose passion for sleeping on beds needed but small encouragement, sang loudly and licked her face. In some queer fashion, she found, he solaced the sudden surprising ache of body and mind.

6

She met Hilary the next evening at King's Cross. They got into a taxi and sat together in the corner of it, taking solace for their brief separation in the quiet joy of reunion. Helena's hat lay at her side, her burnished head on Hilary's shoulder.

She did not care that his mission had failed, as she saw from his face it had, and as she had known it would. What did it matter? What did anything matter — now?

London, to-night, seemed unusually noisy. Though it was Sunday the strains of a barrel organ were discernible through the incessant roar of things. The youth of Euston Road held high revelry at street corners: from somewhere at the back a woman shrieked. Motor traffic dashed past and past, and shrill above all other sound came the raucous voices of the newsboys.

“Pipeyer! Pipeyer! Extry speshul! ’Orrible noos ter-night. . . .”

Hilary put up the windows, not quite shutting out the cries.

“Extry speshul . . . ’orrible ’assination of H’Archdook. Pipeyer!”

“Horrible *what?*” asked Helen lazily.

“Oh, some Sunday paper tragedy, I expect,” Hilary told her. “Providence keeps a special watch over the needs of the Sunday placards: they’re never at a loss.”

During a block in the traffic Helena caught a sudden sight of one of them. “Look,” she said, “it isn’t a murder in a back street, after all.”

“’Orrible noos . . . ’orrible noos from the Ballkins,” yelled a boy.

Hilary put down the window and called to him.

“Here, what’s up?”

“’Ere y’are, sir. H’Archdook murdered. . . . H’Archdook and his missus . . . ’Orrible noos . . . ’orrible noos. . . .”

“Oh Lord,” said Hilary, opening his paper as they moved on, “who’d be an Archduke, eh?”

“Or his missus,” Helena said.

Against Hilary’s shoulder her head was very comfortable. She pressed the closer while he gave her the news. It was “horrible” indeed. The Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the Duchess of Hohenberg had been assassinated at Sarajevo. The murderer had been arrested. To the lovers it seemed a very sordid business, and not really interesting. Sarajevo was a long way off, and neither of them would have known who the Archduke was if the paper had not informed them.

“Some political reason, of course,” Helena said. “I

shouldn't like to be killed for a political reason, somehow. Would you? "

"I don't want to be killed for any reason whatever," Hilary said, growing tired of the paper and throwing it down on the floor of the cab. Assassinations were horrible but they were also dull, unless you were taking a principal part. Why talk of foreign princes and their woes? Life presented so many other problems that seemed to him so much more important. Politics bored him: no one ever took them less seriously. He put an arm round Helena and pressed her warm body up against his. Why think of blood and sudden death on this night of reunion? They were so young and had so much else to think of. . . .

"You've guessed, haven't you, how it was?" he asked, and felt her head nodding "yes" against his shoulder. "Tell me," she said.

There was very little to tell, he said. Courtney had been perfectly polite and perfectly unreasonable. There had been no scene. He was just not going to stir a finger. Sooner or later his wife would come back. You couldn't shake him on that point. He was even, Hilary gathered, manufacturing excuses of a highly plausible nature for her non-appearance at "Windward."

"He expects, you know," Hilary said, "to get you on the rebound."

"And what, just exactly, does that mean? These sporting terms are beyond me."

"It means that you'll be glad enough to have him waiting there for you . . . when I'm tired of you."

"Chucked me. That's the expression, isn't it? "

It was, he said, but she was not to use it.

"Why not? I'm not afraid."

"Aren't you? "

"Not a bit."

"But you see the position? "

"Oh, clearly. I'm an infatuated fool and you're a scoundrel."

He pulled her up a little closer to him.

"All artists are scoundrels," he said. "Did you know that? "

"One of them, at least, is a nice scoundrel."

"You don't want him altered?"

"Not the least little bit."

It was a long while after that when Hilary came suddenly down to earth again.

"All the same, Deirdre, it's wrong. Love ought not to be like this. It's outrageous it should be like this — *for us!* Don't you feel that?"

She shook her head. He went on.

"And if we have any children they'd have a rotten time . . . They always do — the illegitimates."

"That's a much too sweeping statement," she said, "but we needn't have any children if you feel like that about it."

"I know. But we may want some. . . ."

"I don't want anything but you. . . ."

He said nothing to that, save, "Oh, Deirdre, Deirdre. . . ."

"Let's go on as we are," Helena said. "We're happy. We *are*, aren't we? Well, let's go on. Don't think, don't think. . . ."

"We've got to go on. We can't help ourselves . . . now."

"I wouldn't if I could."

"You're stronger, you know, Deirdre, than I am. Finer, somehow. I think you're wonderful."

"That's absurd — the silliest thing I've ever heard you say. I don't *feel* as you do about it. That's all there is in it. To praise me for my attitude is like praising Nelson for his courage and saying that he was born without the sense of fear. If he didn't know what fear was his courage was no credit to him. It's like being born beautiful or ugly — rich or poor. You've no choice in the matter. I don't care one little bit about the marriage service or what other people think of me. You do. So the 'fineness' belongs to you, not to me."

"You're a nice comforting Deirdre," Hilary said. "I hope you mean it all."

"Of course I mean it."

"But you do tell lies — these days. . . ."

"Not that sort of lie — and not to you."

"Don't ever. We'll always tell each other the truth, Deirdre. Let's swear it, now. Even when it's bad hearing it shall still be the truth. God help us!"

"Always," she said. "Lies between us would be the beginning of the end, and there's never going to be an end — for us."

She felt his lips on her hair and fell, suddenly, to a passionate kissing of his hands.

"Look here," he said presently, "we'll just wait for the autumn shows, and then we'll go over to Bruges and see things. We'll spend a whole year over it, and Bletchington will have to find another editorial secretary. If you'll give me every minute you can spare I can finish the 'Deirdre' in time for the Draycott Gallery. I'd like it to be hung there."

She promised him her every spare minute; laid them in a passionate heap at his feet, heard him say that he could work now that he had her as he had never worked before — as he would never work again if he lost her.

"You won't lose me," she said, "why will you be so silly?"

He kissed her closely and long as she turned up her happy face to his — a kiss from which she broke away with a little laugh that was for all the world like a sob, to realise that the taxi had stopped and the driver, despairing of getting them to understand that they had reached their destination, was opening the door for them by performing a gymnastic feat with his arm from where he sat. Helena jumped out and ran, hatless, up the steps to the door. Hilary paid the fare and came after her, carrying her forgotten hat.

The taxi-driver seemed to think he had got hold of a queer pair.

They went into the broad stone hall and up the wide stairs to the studio, and there, sunk deep in the shadow, they made out a brooding masculine form.

"Hallo," said Philip Roscoe's voice. "This is a cheerful piece of news, isn't it?"

7

They discovered presently that he was talking about the Balkan murder which they had dismissed long ages ago — that he was so excited about it he had come round to talk about it to somebody else. He had tried Evey over the 'phone, and Evey had said she was engaged to go with her sister to some

concert or other at which Desirée was playing. She couldn't possibly, she said, get out of it. Hilary laughed and privately wished Phil, for once, at Jerusalem. So did Helena. She did not to-night want to talk to him or to hear him talk, and she thought that Evey *ought* to have "got out of" the concert, because if Phil really had to discuss this horrible murder with somebody, obviously Evey ought to have been the somebody. She dived into the kitchen to make coffee, and when she came back Phil, in a hard excited voice was saying:

"Continental politics, my dear old chap! Good God, they're not. I wish to hell they were. This is European, Hilary. Britain's in it, and France, and Germany. . . ."

"In what?" Helena asked, putting down her tray.

"In the European war that's coming."

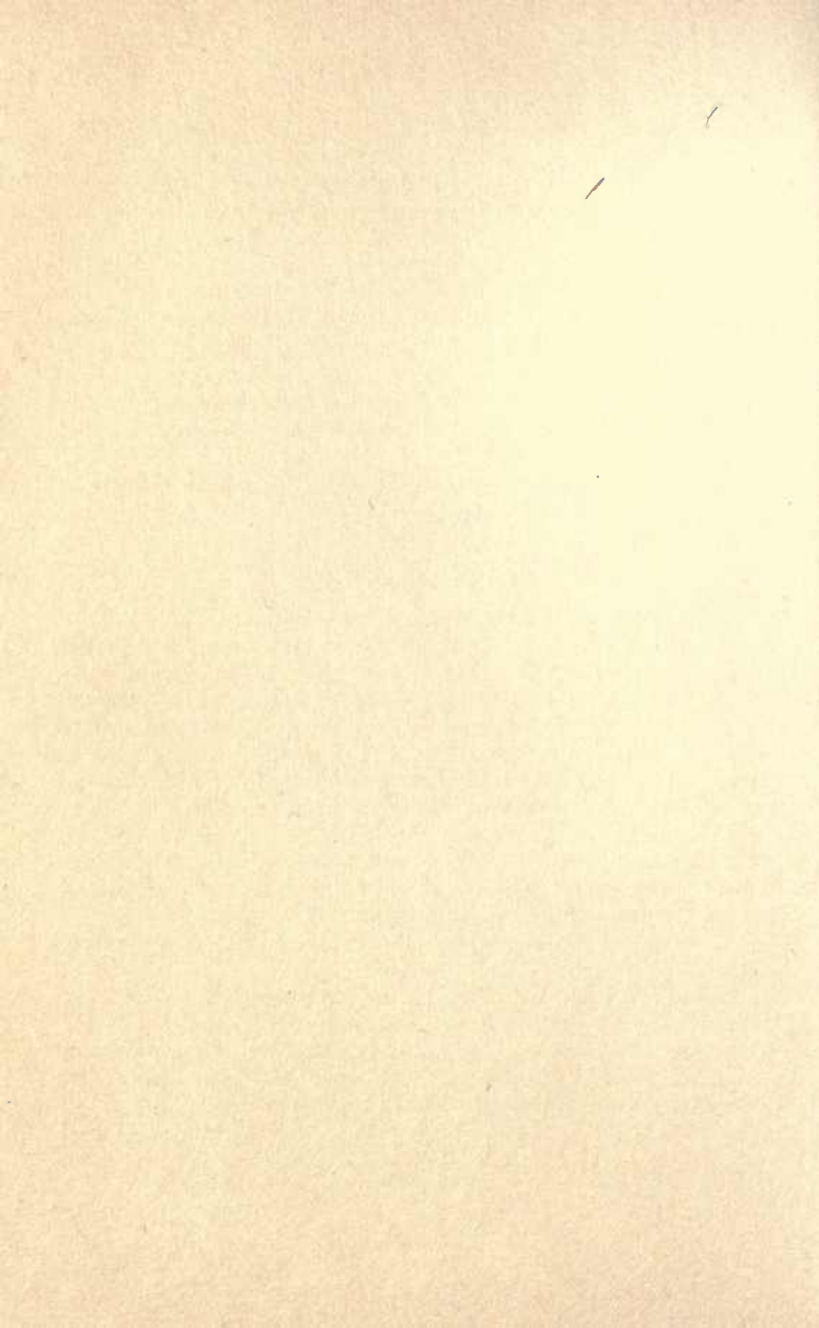
Helena laughed. So did Hilary. Really, Phil was rather mad on this subject of international warfare.

"What nonsense! The death of two people to plunge Europe into war!"

War! Of course there was not going to be war. The thing was ridiculous. Phil was merely riding this diplomatic hobby of his to death. . . . Of course there was not going to be war.

And yet here was Phil saying steadily and gloomily that there was. Sitting there stirring her coffee it seemed to Helena presently that behind the quiet sound of his voice you might hear, if you listened, another — the measured tramp, tramp of armed men, marching out in the bright sunshine to die. . . .

BOOK IV
WASTE SHORES



CHAPTER ONE

I

IN the pale rays of the February sun Hilary stood frowning at his new picture, that he called "Interior." What he had done since lunch did not please him; but it would have surprised him if it had, because these were not "painting" days. One does not do good work with one's mind on something else.

And that, nowadays, was where Hilary's mind usually was.

After all, what did painting matter — good or bad — when one remembered that down there in the street beneath the quiet sky of a windless afternoon the young recruits went swinging by?

"It's no good," he said, "they just won't mix."

Helena did not ask what it was that wouldn't "mix." She knew. He meant painting and war. But she got up and came across to look at the picture he was abandoning. "Interior" was a study of the window corner of the studio, with Helena in her workaday frock, sitting with bent head over a book in the path of the sun. It had been begun in the gush of enthusiasm that followed the acceptance of the "Deirdre" by the Draycott Committee, in those queer far-off days before August, 1914. But there were times when Helena thought it would never be finished at all; for Hilary had said that so often — that war and painting wouldn't mix. . . .

"Can't you really go on, dear?" she asked, "the day's so good."

Hilary said nothing as he turned his picture to the wall and began to wash his brushes. And Helena said nothing either. But she thought of all the other things that these days had been turned to the wall — youth and light-heartedness; joy, beauty; the things that were real and enduring. . . .

"Let's go out, shall we?" Hilary said presently. "Isn't it time we looked Richmond up?"

It was weeks since they had been to Richmond: walking abroad was no occupation these days for the young and fit. There were too many things against it. . . . The red hand with its pointing finger; the women who stared; the White Feather Tribe that hunted in couples; the eternal march of the khaki-clad. . . . One did not "spend" one's odd afternoons, so much as fritter them away, these days, having as little heart for leisure as for work. . . .

But a sudden passion seized them this afternoon for the wide spaces of the Park, the glint of the river — bright like polished steel — beneath the wintry sunshine; and for a sight of some of the old sweet things they'd bundled back behind the curtain they did not dare to lift.

They went out and climbed on to a passing 'bus.

2

They sat, as in old times, on a front seat, with linked arms, but they said little. Riding on 'buses had ceased, since August, 1914, to be the hilarious adventure it once had been; for 'buses nowadays had the disconcerting trick of coming to a standstill in the traffic before a recruiting station or of constituting themselves an honorable rearguard to a company of volunteers.

The afternoon was beautiful — unusually beautiful for February, as every now and then somebody on the 'bus said to somebody else, for all the world as if they saw neither the posters, the volunteers nor the ubiquitous pointing finger, and were strong-minded enough to refrain from reading Mr. Begbie's recruiting verses. Perhaps, too, in this bright sunshine (or because of it) they were able to forget what was happening out there in France and Belgium.

But that was just exactly what neither Hilary nor Helena could do. They had the war on the brain, like most people — only, perhaps, more so. . . .

3

Hilary, of course, would have felt better about it if he'd been in khaki . . . or, perhaps, if certain other people had

not been. That, at this stage, was what it seemed almost to amount to.

You got at his position in regard to the war easily enough. He had no romantic or idealistic illusions about it: and was incapable of finding consolation in the comfortable apportionment of blame the Press meted out among the belligerents. He could see, at any rate, a good deal further than that . . . knew that things didn't happen quite that way — that it wasn't only the man who put the match to the gunpowder trail who was responsible for the explosion. The war, so Hilary reasoned, had occurred because people hadn't cared enough to prevent it . . . because people would not combine to fight it. War was nothing if not the outcome of bankrupt statesmanship: that muddled along on secret alliances and ententes, the Balance of Power and armies and navies in a perpetual state of rivalry. On this question of internationalism the world was mad. The question for Hilary (and the only question, as it seemed, just now) was: Would it have been quite so mad if people had cared a little to prevent it . . . if they had cared, say, as much as Philip had cared? And he never forgot that he — Hilary — had never cared at all . . . that politics — especially the foreign variety — had bored him always to extinction. . . .

There was, too, the question of Belgium. Belgium, it is true, had made warriors of so many who might otherwise have remained as they were — artists, clerks, tailors, plumbers, bill-posters, bakers, newsvendors, or something equally non-belligerent and sociable. But Hilary did not believe that England had gone into the war because of Belgium. Sir Edward Grey, right at the first, had made that clear enough: but Hilary was ready to agree that Belgium outraged had given the necessary spur of idealism and sentiment to the British cause. "A god-send to our bungling diplomats," Philip had called the invasion of Belgium, and — well, Hilary happened to think that Philip was right.

Only, somehow, that didn't, with Hilary, make the minutest shade of difference. Though he saw the war as a Capitalist imbroglio, an outrage on humanity, he got no sort of help from the vision. He realised only that he wasn't in it — and was convinced that he ought to be. Not because he believed

in it, not because he liked fighting (he didn't — he hated it), not even because of Belgium, but because he could not bear to stand aside whilst others ploughed through the horror.

It was that horror he saw this afternoon, even there at Helena's side, with his arm through hers, the crocuses just showing in the London parks, and their 'bus behaving really well.

It was what he saw, too, when he stood in front of his easel and tried to paint. Painting and war! Nothing on earth would make them "mix." . . .

And (even worse) it was what he saw when he looked at Helena. The war got most tremendously in the way of love. The fact was you couldn't escape from it. Unless, perhaps, you joined in. . . .

4

They nearly all had.

First of all Jimmy had gone.

You felt, somehow, that Jimmy had rather liked the war; that for him it had filled in the gaps — brought adventure. You couldn't help seeing, of course, that before the war came, life had never given Jimmy enough to do. It must be strange, now, for Jimmy to have nothing whatever to do. Because Jimmy was dead . . . and dead men lie quietly, even in France. . . .

Then Ronnie Sand and Pamela had come home from Italy, and Pamela had filled many printed pages with romantic versions of their difficulties in doing it, while Ronnie applied for a commission and went off to Salisbury to train.

"Look after Pamela," a wistful Ronnie had said to Helena. "See that she takes care of herself. . . ."

Small doubt she would do that, for Pamela found the war exciting. To her it meant lunches and dinners at the Savoy; the giving of concerts for the wounded; the selling of flags in the street (if the day were fine); and an occasional theatre with a uniformed Ronnie when he came home on leave from Salisbury.

Ronnie, as it transpired, was quite clever about "leave" and things of that sort, so that besides Pamela's occasional

theatre there were evenings in the old house in Chelsea when the war might not be mentioned, but only art and books. Which was all very well if Ronnie arranged them for a Saturday, with the whole of another day yawning happily between them and the hour of return; but on a Sunday no one was really proof against the abysmal gloom which was apt to descend upon them all about nine o'clock in the evening.

No doubt whatever, of course, but that Ronnie was hating the war. Hilary (with his painful interest in the psychology of the young artist turned warrior) wondered much too frequently what had driven him into it. A sense, perhaps, of its righteousness: idealism, sentiment, Belgium, or — Pamela. Impossible to learn from Ronnie, who was never to be cajoled into talking about it. And anyway, he *was* in it. He belonged to the army of the khaki-clad, and he was one of those people who, if he had not, would have helped perhaps to make Hilary feel better about things.

That was true, too, of Arthur Yeomans. . . . Arthur had been one of the first to join — and Hilary had thought he would have been the last. There was no accounting for things of that kind . . . this war had you all ways. Here, at least, however, you understood what had sent Arthur in, when (in these days of appeal to the very young) he might so easily have kept out. But Arthur (entirely without scruple, it seemed, on this question of age) was “fit,” eager, and a dead shot. And he went in, he said, because he loathed Germany as a power. Hilary had said:

“Yes, but you hate Russia more — and Russia’s on our side.”

They argued that pretty fiercely, not once but over and over again. Yet Arthur went, all the same. Helena, who had suffered most, perhaps, from these passionate discussions, got through her good-byes with something approaching equanimity, and was rather inclined to think that Hilary exaggerated when he said that something irreplaceable had gone out of his life with Arthur. There were times even now, it seemed, when Helena could not be entirely fair to Arthur Yeomans. Yet Arthur to-day was not only Hilary’s friend, but hers. For Hilary had been right. Arthur had come in on their side. And he had come in heavily. . . .

Presently — with the falling of the leaves — Conrad Howe had gone, and Brian Vincent had tried to go and had been refused. Conrad (who found the war a more absorbing mistress than he had once found Dagmar North) was still in training, and Brian was trying to live down the heart the military doctors had given him, and had begun to pull ropes. Helena wondered sometimes how much Vivien cared — whether she cared at all. You'd have sworn to see them together that she didn't . . . that, without turning a hair, she let him pull as many ropes as he liked. But Vivien was another of the people who would never talk about the war: it was, she said, a "rotten" topic of conversation, so that you never knew what she thought about it or what she felt. Even the fact that, like Helena, she did no "war work," didn't help you, either, because knowing Vivien you never expected her to do any. She left that, she would have told you, to Olive, who did enough for a dozen women, whilst Helena (who was convinced she hated the war more than anybody else ever had or ever could hate anything) thought that personally she helped it not enough but too much by services rendered to Mr. Bletchington.

For Alexander Bletchington was another of those people who were "enjoying" the war.

There seemed to Helena to be quite a lot of them. Olive, of course, and nearly all the people you met in 'buses and tubes, and Dagmar North, who had recently turned up wearing her old air of self-complacency and a new V.A.D. uniform. Also, there were several handsome healthy young women whom she occasionally brought with her, similarly attired, though you couldn't tell whether, in their case, the complacency was old or new like the uniform. Then there was Barbara Feilding, who, if she wasn't "enjoying" the war, was at least able to look at it without emotion. Barbara had dropped art for mechanics, and Hilary and Helena thought it a pity. So many people could drive motor-cars, so few could model as well as Barbara. They didn't agree with her when she said that art in war time was useless. A thing wasn't useless because people didn't stop to look at it.

But perhaps Barbara had discovered as Hilary had that art and the war didn't go together. . . .

Certainly Stephen Gretton had discovered it. But then, Stephen was that hopeless thing in a practical world—a young man with unpopular ideals who meant to stick to them. . . .

5

Denis O'Connell, too, it transpired, had ideals: of a different sort from Stephen's but no better understood of the Man in the Street, though this scarcely mattered, because Denis being forty-five might have what ideals he liked—at least, in 1914. But as London wasn't included among them he had first of all persuaded a big morning daily to make him its accredited Irish correspondent and had then departed to Dublin, where he had remained ever since. Everyone was sorry but Barbara, who was horribly tired of being proposed to.

This accounted for everyone save Nelly (who took the war, for the time being, as a part, if a regrettable part, of life and helped o'nights at a canteen in the wilds of Woolwich): and for Desirée, who had gone back to France at the very beginning of it all in a perfect frenzy of patriotism that had left everybody gasping, and from which nobody had as yet recovered. She was now somewhere in Belgium with the French Red Cross, writing very seldom to Hilary (who, she thought, ought to join up) and very frequently to Estelle, whom she constantly urged to work for her certificate and come out too. But this annoyed Estelle, because she didn't want to be a nurse and she hated Desirée's letters, which were all about wounded soldiers (who were, all of them, *preux chevaliers*); about shells (which were symphonic) and ruins (which were not); and the Boches (whom Desirée loathed): and never once about the one thing on earth Estelle really cared to hear about.

The war had certainly cooked poor Estelle's goose—leaving her to turn back desolate into Streatham as Eurydice, so they say, had turned back into Hades. A half-rescue, perhaps, was worse than one at all, and in Estelle's case they had even "rounded up" her German professor, so that she sorrowed indeed as one without hope.

Evey, these days, wore a blue turquoise ring on the third finger of her left hand and Phil (who had put it there) was in France acting as correspondent to the *Sentinel*—a position he

jeopardised continually by his inordinate passion for truth, upon the merits of which he and the Censor were by no means agreed.

Helena had once said that Evey "in love" would be charming. She was. But there were people who thought Evey charming at all times. Helena was one of them and Phil was another, of course.

But it was Phil who said that Evey was like one of Stephen's drawings — you either liked her or disliked her. You couldn't be indifferent.

The war interested Evey tremendously. That is, what Phil had to say about it (and all other wars, for that matter) interested her. But she regarded it all with horror rather than the toleration her interest might have adumbrated; for she felt that it was evil, and, an apt pupil, had already learnt that it was unnecessary. That, Phil insisted, was what you had first to make people understand — that wars simply needn't happen. But, since this one had, he also insisted that while it lasted it was the only thing in the world that mattered. You might call it a dog-fight if you liked: but it wasn't a dog-fight you could ignore.

Either way, it had crashed into Evey's new-found happiness (as into Helena's) and stunned it. Presently, of course, it would recover: but just now it didn't matter, because somehow it didn't seem as if she had any right to it. That, however, was the sort of thing she might say to Helena if she liked, but never under any circumstances to Phil.

And it wasn't only the war. Evey had guessed the truth about Helena and Hilary and it made her sad, because Helena hadn't said a word. When Evey mentioned the subject to Phil, he had said in that provoking way of his, that he had guessed how things were long ago — ever since that night when news of the Sarajevo murder had come through. They were both so tremendously excited that evening they had forgotten, it seems, to "keep it up."

And there had been further occasions, so that other people too had guessed.

But Hilary and Helena did not care these days who had guessed or who had not. On the whole, however, they were glad that Phil and Evey had.

6

The 'bus (which this afternoon had behaved quite well) ran up its usual backwater at Richmond and left them to wade out into the main stream for themselves.

They walked up the hill together and along the Terrace into the Park. The day was still beautiful, but they found the Park disappointing, for men drilled on its open spaces and the Boy Scouts spread themselves tempestuously abroad. Richmond was a land of shadowed memories, across which as they walked Hilary and Helena scrawled a mental Ichabod, wondering why it should hurt—like that. Presently, in their clever way, they dodged the men drilling and the Boy Scouts doing numerous other things, and kissed each other sadly under the winter trees before they turned their backs on the Park and went down the hill for tea.

Tea was better. Somehow tea always is. Tea is an incurably cheerful meal; and the Richmond tea-shops were bright and coloured. They sat in a corner and ate toasted buns and cakes with cream in them (you could get them in February, 1915) while Hilary refreshed his eyesight by looking at Helena's uncovered head against the bright-coloured cushions. He had had her and loved her for seven months now . . . love that had been sweet, was sweet still and might, even, be sweeter. No sign all this time from Jerome . . . the man dispossessed. Seven months was a long time . . . one could forget a lot in seven months, but then one could remember a lot, too. Which had Jerome done? Which, for that matter, had Hilary done?

But he ceased presently to wonder about that, because looking at Helena's head bent now over the tea-cups he thought he saw what had gone wrong with his work earlier that afternoon. If the light wasn't too atrocious when he got back he could put it right before anybody came. Not, these days, that there were many left to come, except Dagmar North, who no longer mattered, Denis's pretty ladies, who never had, and Barbara who was ceasing to matter—much. Nelly was all right, of course. At least she would be if she could only manage to forget the word "canteen."

Outside the cosy tea-room, however, it was raining hard, and at the foot of the hill discretion drove them inside the

'bus. Five minutes later the conversation drove them out again, as the conversation inside 'buses was apt to do.

They got rather wet and cold up there; but they didn't mind that, because up there in the cold and the darkness it was easier, somehow, to forget the war; easier, anyway, than among that fur-clad cluster of femininity inside. . . . They sat close, talking of other things, keeping the one thing at bay. It was an old game of theirs; only sometimes, these days, they were apt to forget the trick of it.

It was seven o'clock when they reached home, and there was a letter for Helena. She sat absorbed in it while Hilary tried in the artificial light to get right what he had that morning got wrong.

7

The letter was from Cissie Ellingham. Cissie was the only person who wrote now from Rattenby, since Walter had left his bank and gone into training. Helena's father and mother had washed their hands of her. Jerome kept silence deep as the grave. So did Angela. Wimbledon and Putney had remonstrated, pleaded, bullied, and now, presumably, sulked. Helena had almost forgotten these things. . . . In time Wimbledon might probably recover; Putney, less probably — her father and mother perhaps never. (A strangely painful thought that last, she found.) Ted had written once, and not very usefully, to the effect that she was making a fool of herself and would regret it.

That, too, she had almost forgotten.

But Walter had not only written, and written differently, Walter had run up to town to see her. He had been grave, very grown-up and concerned. But he had stayed to tea and supper . . . had stroked Mark Antony, smoked Hilary's cigarettes and admired his pictures. And when presently, getting him for a moment to herself, Helena had said, "You see, Wally, don't you, that it's just no use what any of them say?" Walter had said that he did see very well and that it was — amongst other things — a deuce of a shame.

Walter, at least, was on her side, and Cissie because of him.

That had all happened a month before the war, and now Cissie wrote to say that Walter was going to France almost immediately and that Jerome was already there. He had gone out six weeks ago with the grey car for the British Red Cross, and it had taken him, Cissie said, over three months to get there. He had even tried to get in the line and had failed, for with that knee of his no one would take him as a fighting man. Cissie was loquacious about Jerome in whom she was not personally concerned, and briefly matter-of-fact about Walter who was all the world to her. You could see it was a thought she dared not face as yet—that terrible horrible thought of Walter out there in the mud and blood. . . .

Helena, however, managed to look fairly calmly at the mental picture of Jerome who was there with his car. It reminded her, she found, of Jimmy, who had "enjoyed" the war. Jerome too, she reflected, would take the war rather like that. But Jimmy, though he had "enjoyed" the war, had died of it too. . . .

Suddenly it flashed on her. Was *that* going to be the way out? It was horrible, ghastly, not to be thought about. Yet she found that she could think of nothing else. Her mind seemed closed to all else but that one line of hideous conjecture, and long after she had folded up the letter and put it back in its envelope she sat there staring at Cissie's schoolgirlish handwriting without seeing it at all. She saw nothing whatever but the ugly evil things that came up and stared at her as they had stared before. Only this time she made no attempt to stamp them out. They were horrible, but she found that this time she could bear to look upon them.

Hilary's voice recalled her—an amazing incredible sanity, like a breath of summer air through a lazarhouse.

"Feeling all right? Not too tired?"

A little quiver—that he was too busy to see—swept over her face.

"Not tired," she said, "but murderous."

Hilary misunderstood, as she hoped he would. Because she wanted suddenly to get away.

"I'm a tyrant, I know," Hilary said, unhooking his palette from his thumb and putting it down. "But come and look. Haven't I made it better?"

She agreed that he had done that. Even she could see, she told him, how very much better it was.

“It’s coming, isn’t it?”

“Finely!”

She reached up and kissed him.

“Cleversticks!” she said.

The ridiculous word masked the heights and depths of her pride in him. And that, as of old, both thrilled and delighted him. His arms came round her, making her prisoner.

“Still want to murder me?”

She didn’t say — how could she? — that it wasn’t on his account she had felt murderous. Instead she laughed, twisted herself artfully from his embrace and went off to change her frock. At the door she looked back.

“Oh, I forgot,” she said. “A Rattenby letter, with news. Catch!”

Hilary caught.

The letter was addressed to “Mrs. Helena Sargent,” Cissie’s compromise — or Walter’s. And in any case dictated by a delicacy of feeling that did them infinite credit.

Helena, however, had her own reasons for not wanting to be there when Hilary read what Cissie had written.

CHAPTER TWO

I

FEBRUARY slipped past and the whole of March, and April came hopelessly, though with Easter, and went out in the roar of the guns hammering for the second time at Ypres. The Allied forces had landed in Gallipoli, with Arthur Yeomans helping them, and May had begun infamously with the sinking of the *Lusitania*.

It was soon after that (on the Saturday of the Whitsun weekend) when Stephen Gretton looked in unexpectedly after an absence of a week or two. Not that the outrage on the high seas was in any way connected with his appearance, but only that, for Helena, it helped, somehow, to date the evening which (as it turned out) she had good cause to remember. As for Stephen, he came, quite frankly, to exercise the memory of a painful afternoon. Painful afternoons were frequent occurrences at this time for Stephen: he suffered them sadly, without getting inured or hardened (for that is a trick a certain set of ideals will play you. They prevent you from growing a pachyderm, without which life in war time becomes little better than a series of dagger-thrusts). Certainly, for Stephen, the dagger-thrusts were frequent and deep, so that life was not easy nor conducive to the development of the social virtues.

Besides, there was Stella. She, in herself, afforded an excellent reason why Stephen just now should see less of his friends, why even he should desire to see less of them, and why the dagger-thrusts should go more deeply. For Stella was another of those rare people who were doing no "war work," saving her energies for the task of having a baby. Stella, no more than Stephen, was having a good time, these days. Plunged into a strange ugly world of turmoil and strife, surrounded by a husband's "ideals" and a family's patriotic objection to them, she was far from feeling that she had chosen her moment with dis-

cretion. And when it wasn't ideals and patriotism it was money, or, more correctly, the lack of it. For Stephen had no money at all save what he earned, and that, in May, 1915, was extremely little. Stella, whose attitude to money until her marriage had always suggested that she thought it grew happily on trees, could not understand why the war should affect their income so disastrously, and she only looked worried when Stephen informed her that in war time artists were a negligible quantity. The chief fact for Stella, of course, was that there was very little money just when she wanted a good deal more than usual. You could not blame her just now for getting no further than that.

Though she might have done, perhaps, if she had been present at this particular afternoon for which Stephen now sought oblivion, and which (save for its new air of finality) was typical enough of many others that had preceded it. It was connected with a commission Stephen had recently executed for John Reece at the Sign of the Lighted Lantern, and which that gentleman had rejected contumeliously. Reece was a publisher for whom in happier days Stephen had done a good deal of illustration work, from which (even when it didn't altogether satisfy Reece, and few things did) other commissions were apt to spring. A week or so ago Stephen had been asked to submit a cover for a new book of war poetry, to be issued immediately from the house of the Lighted Lantern, and for reasons doubtless clear enough to himself Stephen had in due course presented Reece with a line drawing of a hideous figure with an axe, and made matters worse by calling it "war." The thing had a diabolical imaginative cleverness and contained good work — but none of these things were of any use to Reece, who wanted Britannia and a flag and said so in language that (notwithstanding Mrs. Reece's drawing-room) was unmistakable.

It was to deliver Britannia and a flag that Stephen had gone this afternoon to Reece's house. But nothing — not even Reece's cheque resting comfortably in his pocket — could efface for Stephen the memory of that bitter afternoon. It wasn't only Reece and his impossible views on art for illustration purposes. The well-dressed women who drank tea in the Reeces' drawing-room (and who ten months ago had been pleased enough to talk to the nice boy who did, so Reece said,

such clever work) were mixed up in it, too. Because this is a queer world and these fashionably stupid women belonged ("belonged" is really the word) to men who "did" things. The occasional commissions which had reached Stephen via their interest in him were already, he knew, things of the past. And remembering Stella and circumstances and that one has to "live," Stephen cursed himself for an idiot. It wasn't only the line-drawing nor what Reece had said about it (though he had said a good deal) but that Stephen had allowed that bogey of his tremendously unpopular ideals to come up too frequently and look too long over the hedge of his obstinately civilian attire. Stephen could bear to look at the truth: he knew he ought to have held his tongue. But that, at this stage, was precisely what he could not do. For to the other disabilities under which, at this moment, he was labouring, Stephen Gretton added the further — and greatest — disability of being Stephen Gretton.

He sat now at Helena's side, talking to her of noncontroversial everyday things, and of Stella; profoundly grateful for the quiet and calm of Helena's presence and for the blue shield of Hilary's curtains, cutting off the vexed world at the threshold.

Over there at the window Hilary stood with the line-drawing of "War" in his hand. Stephen had brought it not only for criticism but for acceptance, because Hilary, so he said, was the only person he knew who would take it off his hands, and he, personally, never wanted to see it again.

Hilary's voice came to them presently, amused, incredulous, from the window.

"You don't mean to say, Gretton, you offered this thing to Reece?"

"Why not? It was for a volume of war poetry. . . ."

"But, my dear Gretton, nobody wants to think of war as an obscenity."

"People aren't thinking at all — they're only feeling."

"Of course. . . . Britannia and flags don't satisfy your brain, or if they do it's a queer sort of brain. What was the book?"

Stephen named it and its author.

"Well . . . he's done good work."

Stephen was understood to say that in this case the work he had done deserved the cover it had achieved.

"Meaning," said Hilary, "Britannia and the flag."

Gretton nodded.

The blue curtain parted to admit Vivien and Brian Vincent.

"How do, Gretton?" said Vincent, not too cordially, perhaps. "Haven't seen you lately."

"No," Stephen said, welcoming this successful assault upon the blue shield with no very great elation. For between himself and Brian there was of late a great gulf fixed — all the difference in fact between the man who believes you can discover the causes of war in Government "Blue" books and the man who does not. It existed, in measure, of course between Brian and Hilary, too: but Brian knew his Hilary — or believed he did. Hilary might talk; it was not so certain how he would act, for he was that essentially unhappy creature — the man who can see all sides of a subject. And at least Brian could understand Hilary's point of view where Stephen's was a sort of secular Athanasian creed which nobody understands or expects to understand.

Scenting trouble, Hilary came away from the window and put Stephen's drawing on his mantelshelf. He propped it up carefully behind Barbara's "Diana" and looked at it through half-shut eyes.

"Any news, Vincent?" he asked. These were the days when everyone was expecting Italy to come in. "Got a paper?"

Brian had, and fished it out.

2

Helena and Vivien, watching them poring over it together, and agreed as to the undesirability of war as a topic of conversation, greeted the entry of Barbara and Nelly with a relief that emphasised their failure to start another in successful opposition. With Barbara and Nelly to-night was a girl in khaki, whose name nobody caught, but whom Barbara (who had brought her) called Rosamund. Rosamund had a large, white face, round eyes and a limp handshake, and apparently Barbara had brought her for ornamental purposes (there is no accounting for taste even in so good an artist as Barbara), for

after wishing everybody good evening she said nothing at all — seemingly overwhelmed by the sight of three able-bodied young men in mufti.

Nelly was taking a night off. You gathered, somehow, from her statement of this fact that it wasn't "all beer and skittles" at her canteen. Barbara, sick for once of mechanics and the nasty ways of motors, drew Hilary away from Brian and his paper to talk of art and Stephen's black and white drawing of "War," which she probably thought clever but misguided, like Stephen himself. The others made small talk round the fire — not very successfully, because the girl Barbara called Rosamund was so obviously still working out the problem of the three apparently fit young men. Every now and then painful intervals occurred, when Helena and Vivien plunged to say the first thing that came into their heads, hoping to keep everybody off Italy and the *Lusitania*, of which Helena (after the *Britisher* post, immensely augmented of late) was inclined to think she had had enough for one day. Once they tried plays, but not too happily, because Rosamund could not understand how anybody nowadays found time (or the inclination) to go to the theatre, and, in any case, would not have gone to the plays the others cared about. And when the plays gave out, it was books. They grumbled, all of them, at the mass of literature the war had produced. The guns, so they said, had rendered everybody incoherent; nobody seemed able to think. But here the girl called Rosamund, who did not care for reading, and was personally much bored by the conversation, seized the opportunity to elbow the books out of it. She told Stephen that she thought everyone nowadays was thinking a great deal. She had noticed, she said, that the war was making people much more thoughtful. Not the people, they told her, who wrote things. They were just rushing into print and working off steam. It was very trying for the few people who did really happen to care for literature. Apparently Rosamund didn't. Certainly nobody was prepared to say that the books she mentioned came under that heading, not even Brian, who was not "booky" and was secretly dismayed at the turn the conversation had taken.

"Well, I must say I like a book that brings in the war," the girl called Rosamund observed.

"Don't you find it gets a little tiring after a time?" Nelly inquired. "You see, nearly every novelist is doing it because it's so tremendously difficult to explain why your hero, if not actually senile, isn't in one of the Services, and there are only a very limited number of legitimate reasons why he shouldn't be."

"You couldn't be interested in a shirker, of course," agreed Rosamund.

Stephen smiled.

"Not as a hero, perhaps."

"I *hate* books with heroes," averred Vivien, "and I hate books about the war."

"Don't find much to read these days, do you?" Nelly asked.

Vivien stretched her arms above her head and said no, not much; but anything was better than reading books that made the war romantic.

"But don't you think it is?" Rosamund asked.

"Romantic? War? *This* war?"

Rosamund said "yes," rather in the tone of one who would remind you that this was the only war she was old enough to know anything about.

"Fancy *anybody* calling this war romantic," Vivien exclaimed. "Why it isn't even exciting, much less 'romantic.' It's just a dull slaughter. Everything really interesting in life died within a month of it."

Rosamund, however, declared that nothing had been really interesting for her until the coming of the war, for Rosamund had lived in the suburbs with old-fashioned parents, and had had no independent life of her own at all. The war, it seemed, had positively emancipated her. . . .

They weren't sure what Rosamund meant by "emancipation" and they appeared, all of them, not to think very much, anyway, of the girl who waits for a war to "emancipate" her. But they were polite people, on the whole, and kept this unflattering opinion to themselves. For a little while the conversation (as it so often did, these days) hung fire.

Things would have been easier, Helena knew, if Stephen had not been present. She had the feeling this evening that at any moment one of their heated "war" arguments might begin, and knew how difficult it was to remember that she must not take sides. Brian, she thought, tended to make an argument

personal: he disapproved not so much of your thesis as of you for owning anything so disreputable, and Hilary, so fond in different ways of all these people, would never allow them to quarrel.

"Between us," he had said to her once, "we've got to save a few friends for Stephen. He's making enemies of them all — fast."

That was long ago, in the very early days of the war, when people were studying and talking of Blue and White and Red Books, and new friendships were being made and old ones broken: but it was still up to her, so she thought, to keep the peace, and she was worried this evening because it seemed to her that the storm — and a particularly heavy one — might break at any moment. Perhaps Stephen thought so too. At any rate, he began suddenly talking to Vivien of ordinary everyday things: of the latest art exhibition, the newest ragtimes, and of Stella who, as Helena knew, was going shortly to stay with her family at Brighton because they were rich and Stephen was poor — and this business of getting born was an expensive one. . . .

Remembering these things Helena had a moment of fierce loathing of a world upon which Happiness had turned its back, in which Force ruled.

3

The entry of Pamela Sand, with a young man in a lieutenant's uniform, hurled that moment of passionate thought into space, for passion and Pamela could not live in the same room. You saw at once that she was the same Pamela as of old — that the war had made no difference to her at all, except that it had given her a reason for being more prettily dressed than before. It was a patriotic duty, nowadays, she was fond of saying, for every woman to look her best. More than ever now, men wanted pretty women and pretty things about them. That was the sort of thing she said in the *Woman's Looking-Glass* week after week and week after week. It is surprising in how many different ways you can say the same thing if you really try.

Pamela this afternoon was doing her best for an unhappy world in a new spring costume and a little hat of grey that

showed the pale loveliness of her hair and was adorned with a wreath of flowers in exquisitely blended colours. She shook hands, kissed Nelly and Helena and introduced her friend as Lieutenant Millington. He was a nice-looking boy with a charming smile, a modest manner and (as Pamela announced) a turn for poetry and water-colours. So they let him wander about Hilary's blue room and hoped (some of them) that he could not hear Pamela gushing about him in her clear sweet voice, as she would have gushed about the Archangel Gabriel if he had happened to be on her visiting list.

"The *dearest* person, really. Just down from some northern university. Leeds, Manchester . . . somewhere up there. He came down, Harvey tells me (Harvey of the *Monitor*, you know) on purpose to join up. Don't you think he's charming to look at?"

They all did, but only Rosamund ventured to say so. They were horribly afraid he would hear. Rosamund didn't seem to think it would matter if he did.

"It's his eyes I like," she said. "So fearless, aren't they?"

Her own flashed admiration in the direction of the khaki-clad figure talking so quietly to Hilary and Barbara over there in the corner by Conrad's bronze relief. Pamela went on.

"Yes, aren't they? And he knows just nobody at all in London. Harvey sent him along to me and asked me to look after him. Harvey, of course, thinks he's a genius. He writes poems, you know. Things about the country and all that — hunting and walking and games. You've seen them probably, Lena, in the *Monitor*."

"Lena" had. They were signed, all of them, just E. T. M., and that stood, it seemed, for Edmund Talbot Millington, who was, no doubt about it, a very considerable poet.

"I thought them most unusually good," Helena said, amongst whose accomplishments the art of gush did not seem to be included.

"That's what Harvey says. He declares he's got a big future. That's why it's so fine — his giving it up, I mean. Just to go out and fight. Of course I told Harvey I'd give him a good time. You can't do too much for these dear boys, can you?"

"You can't indeed," agreed the girl Barbara had called Rosamund. "Is he going to France?"

Helena, thinking of the poems ("about the country and all that") hoped not.

"I don't know," Pamela said. "Of course he's most frightfully keen to get there."

Helena and Vivien exchanged glances, as though the thought had occurred to both of them that no one with eyes like that was ever "frightfully keen" on such a horror as France was at the moment. Helena guessed that Lieutenant Millington, like many others, was only "frightfully keen" to get it over and done with. They were victims, these nice boys, every one of them. That always was how she thought of them. She saw them, in fact, so much as victims that she failed almost entirely to see them as the heroes they were. . . .

Out of the little pause that ensued she heard Brian inquiring for news of Ronnie.

"Still at Salisbury?" he wanted to know.

Pamela said yes, but added that it might be "anywhere at any moment."

"France?"

"Via Chelsea, I hope," said Nelly.

Pamela laughed.

"Well, France, anyway, I expect," she said. She sounded important and thrilled, and rather as though a husband in France was worth two on Salisbury Plain.

"Lucky devil," muttered Brian.

The girl called Rosamund had a sudden spasm of interest.

"Then you do want to go?" she asked Brian.

"Won't have me."

"Oh, hard luck!"

"Rotten!"

"Won't they have you either?"

The spasm of interest flickered for an instant in Stephen's direction.

"I'm afraid," Stephen said, "that it will pain you very much to hear I haven't inquired."

"Oh, you're never one of those funny people, are you, Mr. . . . Gretton, isn't it?"

Stephen bowed to show that she had his name correctly, and he smiled because "funny" was one of the few epithets that had not, so far, been applied to him. "Funny?" he said.

"Well, queer, then. People who think we oughtn't to fight. You don't look like one, you know."

What she meant was that he didn't wear his hair unusually and did nothing eccentric with his collar and tie. It was scarcely her fault, perhaps, that she thought all these "queer" people did. Moreover, she really wanted to think well of him because she considered him so good-looking.

It was Jimmy (not ordinarily distinguished as a psychologist) who had said one day, "It's no good talking about it, it seems to me. There just *are* two sets of men in the world: those who can fight and those who can't. Anybody'd spot Gretton as a pacifist before he'd opened his mouth." But Rosamund would have looked at him a very long time before she would have seen anything of the sort (the mufti notwithstanding). She did really want to think the best of him and his words were disconcerting. Jimmy's "two classes of men" were unknown to her. All men fought, of course, when necessary, or declared themselves cowards and "shirkers." She considered Stephen too handsome to be classed (at any rate hastily) with these "outsiders" whom she could not possibly know. And while she hesitated Helena plunged suddenly to the rescue.

"Mr. Gretton," she said, "is a Quaker. Quakers may not fight. They don't believe, you see, in the argument of physical force."

"But what else can you believe in with awful people like the Germans?" Rosamund inquired. "Think of poor little Belgium and the *Lusitania*."

"Isn't this story about the *Lusitania* absurd?" Pamela here put in.

"What story?" Nelly asked, "about its carrying arms?"

"Yes. I've heard it twice to-day. It's such a silly thing to say, even for pacifists. Of course it isn't true, but if it were it wouldn't have made any difference."

"Of course not. Those beasts would have sunk it, anyway."

"I fancy," said Stephen, "that wasn't quite what Mrs.

Sand meant." (Pamela nowadays was always "Mrs. Sand" to Stephen.)

"No," Pamela said. "I meant that the munitions wouldn't have made the sinking of the boat any better. Morally, I mean. Nothing justifies murder."

"Except — sometimes — circumstances."

"Circumstances?"

Pamela raised her finely pencilled eyebrows at Stephen. She really couldn't imagine what he meant.

"The Western Front . . . and the Gallipoli Peninsula."

"But that's war, not murder. Don't be silly, Stephen."

"When does murder cease to be murder?"

"Is that a riddle?"

"One," said Stephen, "that has agitated better brains than mine."

"Well, I don't propose to let it agitate mine. Is there, by any chance, an answer?"

"You wouldn't care to hear it."

"I'm quite sure I shouldn't."

"Shut up, you two!" From Vivien.

"It's Stephen's fault. He will say such idiotic things."

"Everybody says idiotic things in war time," said Nelly. "The most idiotic, of course, are said by men over military age and by women."

"And the Press," said Helena, never able for long to forget Mr. Bletchington and the *Britisher*.

"I wonder," Stephen said, "if there are really any people who talk like the papers, and if so where are they to be found?"

"In the 'buses that go to Richmond," Helena said.

"Oh, really? I live at Richmond," Rosamund announced, and Helena said, "Oh, I'm sorry," rather quickly. But she needn't have done, for Rosamund was far from regarding Helena's statement as a libel upon her townsmen and women. She quite approved of the things one read in newspapers, having all the exaggerated respect of the ill-educated for the printed word. All the same, she did not care for reading, and preferred photographs to letterpress. She was essentially one of the women Lord Northcliffe had in mind when he evolved the first "picture daily."

"I believe *Lena's* a pacifist, anyway," Pamela remarked.

"Am I?" Helena asked. She really didn't know. Were you a pacifist if you hated war? The word was rather ridiculous, she thought: she did not like it. It had a negative passionless sound, and it suggested inaction. And that was not at all how she felt.

"But we're all pacifists, aren't we?"

It was Barbara who spoke, coming up just then with Hilary and the young poet in uniform.

"Rotten word!" Brian said, who disliked it, however, not for its peculiar inexpressiveness but for its present-day associations.

"I'm not saying it's a good word. It isn't, of course. The pacifists are certainly ill-served by their label. But then, the English language is full of such unsatisfactory words. Look at 'suffragette,' which if it means anything, must mean, I suppose, 'a little suffrage.'"

"Why not say 'pacifists' and have done with it?" Hilary wanted to know.

"'Pacifists' isn't any better: it's merely longer. I'd rather have the hated 'pacifist.' And there isn't so very much against it used in a broad sense. All of us here hate war and want to prevent its occurring again. Doesn't that make us 'pacifists'?"

"Not quite, I fancy," said the young poet. "We should split up, shouldn't we, over ways and means? The issue seems to me to be one not of principle, but of method. All the people worth while want to end war: the only question is—*how?*"

Stephen nodded. He was grateful to this tolerant being whose statement did not adumbrate the extraordinary bitterness of feeling that seemed eternally to separate Stephen from the mass of people who disagreed with him.

"The legacy of militarism is—militarism," he said in that quiet tone of conviction that Brian had once called "Gretton's God-Almighty certainty." But it did not annoy Helena, who had more than a touch of it herself. Neither did it seem to annoy Lieutenant Millington, who had not.

"I agree," he said, "but what is one to do in this world of armies and navies? If we acquiesce in them it seems to me

we acquiesce, more or less, in war. In the same way, of course, we acquiesce in our prisons, in our poor law and economic systems. It's the foundation of society that's wrong. And so long as we don't attempt to interfere with that I really can't see that we've a leg to stand on when we complain of inevitable (if inconvenient) results."

With vague relief Helena saw that this evening Hilary had nothing to contribute to the conversation. He sat gazing into the fire with a face completely non-committal as though the talk was of football or cricket.

"Take the armament business," Millington went on. "If we didn't know it before at least we've known it since Snowden's speech in the House. The armament business is the one real International. Armstrong and Krupp and the rest of them work hand in hand — a loving unity of destruction. Which of us has ever lodged any sort of protest against that? It didn't excite us to know that some of our foremost 'pacifists' held shares in armament concerns. And surely it ought to have done."

"But you're not going to say, are you," Brian asked, "that armaments cause war?"

"I'm not, but on the other hand, no one can claim that they cause peace. Nothing and nobody's out to do that, of course. Nobody 'causes' peace: it's just a blessed accident. Whoever heard of a Peace Office? It's war, not peace, you expect, under this system of ours, and it's war, not peace, that we prepare for. The policy's sound, it seems to me, because under the existing state of things war, sooner or later, is bound to come. Always on the one side you have the desire for the maintenance of the *status quo* — the retention of what is possessed — and on the other, the desire to possess. We get down at bottom again to the property idea that rules all the civilised world. Our very religion is founded upon it. Or ought I to say our 'creeds'? In our schools we teach our children that theft is a greater crime than cruelty, and we punish it much more severely in our police-courts. As a people, possession's in our blood. What we forget is that it may be in other people's, too."

"All that's very probably true," Barbara interposed. "But, all the same, I don't quite see where it takes us to. Or per-

haps I do see. What I mean is that it isn't much good discussing the beginnings of your fire while your house is burning. Everyone's doing far too much talking about the war and its origins. The thing to do, it seems to me, is to get on with the war. You *are*, I know. You've a right to talk. I haven't. I hope I'm not sounding horribly personal. But I can't help thinking that those of us who can't help had much better hold our tongues."

"Bravo!" agreed Brian. "We're in it and we've got to see it through. That's all that matters to-day, as far as I can make out."

"It has, of course, occurred to you," suggested Stephen, "that there has never been a war when that wasn't said. Up to a point, the certain knowledge that it would be said has made each fresh war possible."

"Yes," said Brian, "and it has also occurred to me that it will continue to be said of every war to come because it happens to be true."

"Perfectly," Millington agreed, "once you grant our position as possessors — and rightful possessors — of three-fourths of the habitable globe."

"But there aren't going to be any more wars," Rosamund observed. "This is a war to end war."

They told her, sadly, that Queen Anne was dead.

"What's your own position, Millington?" Hilary asked. "What sent you in?" This was a subject upon which Hilary fished for motives as a pretty girl for compliments.

"Just this," said Millington. "I can't help thinking that we of the younger generation ought to have done better. But we did, most of us, nothing at all. Politics — especially the foreign variety — aren't popular with the young of to-day, or weren't (I suppose 'popular' isn't exactly the word now.) Nobody wanted to be bothered. . . . There were exceptions, of course. There's that man — Roscoe isn't his name? — out there for the *Sentinel*. Ah, you know him, do you? Well, he's been ploughing his lonely furrow: and there are a few more. Some of them are the most unpopular men in England to-day. That won't last, of course: they're big enough to emerge. But men like Roscoe have earned the right to stand out if they want to. And I haven't. Very few of us have, it

seems to me. . . . I'm not sure, either, that one doesn't fight war best from the inside. Anyway, it's a point of view, and one thing's certain. There isn't anything for me to do but shoulder my own particular piece of responsibility and make the best of it. I've no sort of right to be out of it when so many others are in, who probably don't like it any better than I do. . . . Of course, that's only my own personal feeling about it. I think that was what you wanted. I hope I don't sound didactic."

"Not in the least," Hilary said. "I think you're right. At any rate I've been looking for an answer to your arguments for ten months and I haven't found one yet."

"But it's absurd," Vivien objected, "how could *we* have altered things? They were settled before we were born. The juggernaut would have crushed us like worms if we'd attempted to alter its course."

"Surely that's true?" said Helena.

"Probably," said Millington, "but it's the effort that counts, that would help us now. And the juggernaut would have to stop if enough of us got in its way."

"Is it only the system?" Nelly asked. "Isn't it, perhaps, something inherent in the nature of Man who is a belligerent animal? I know that might, too, explain the system, but I read an article the other day which argued that war must be an eternally recurrent event. Men, it seems, do really *like* killing each other."

"I can't say," objected Vivien, "that it's a phenomenon I'd noticed myself."

"Oh, but I think they do, you know," Rosamund assured her. "I know a woman who married a man who had a shooting box down in the New Forest somewhere. She told me that the only way she could keep him decent and civilised was to pack him off for a week every now and then to shoot things."

"It's a pity," said Hilary, "that he didn't begin with her."

The young poet smiled quietly into the fire.

"But even if a man doesn't mind shooting rabbits," he said, "isn't there a possibility that he may, let us say — dislike intensely — the shooting of his fellow-men?"

"If men become wild beasts, they have to be shot, haven't they?" Pamela inquired. "One doesn't want to do it (I don't

believe men want to kill each other: that's silly) but you can't argue in the jungle, you know."

"Oh, if we're still in the jungle. . . ."

Barbara, who did not like these discussions any better than Helena or Vivien, though for different reasons, shrugged graceful shoulders. The only thing worth while, these days, according to Barbara, was to be a man. She hoped Rosamund wasn't going to make a fool of herself. It was so idiotic to talk when there was so much to be done! She was sick of women's talk about war — this war. Barbara considered war a man's job and the little that women could do scarcely counted. They ought in decency to hold their tongues, and let men forget (if they could) in war time that women existed. What right had women, who so fervently resented men's interference in the sphere of the feminine, to hound men on to the battlefield? Though Barbara thought all men ought to fight, she would have died rather than tell any man she thought he ought to join up. The White Feather Army filled her with fury, and though she did not approve of Hilary's indecision at least she understood and respected it. Her imagination helped her there. Killing — even in so good a cause as this of the Allies — could not be a pleasant business. She knew enough of Hilary to know that he would hate it. But for herself she could submerge the individual into those issues that she considered vastly greater and more enduring. If Barbara had fought she would not have done so without faith. For no hopeless cause would she have drawn the sword. But she was a woman and could not fight. Always something of a trial, her sex just now was a positive pain to her. In war time it was hateful to be a woman.

Rosamund, on the other hand, seemed to find it extraordinarily thrilling and romantic. She liked to think that vast numbers of young men were marching out for her protection. She made the war an intensely personal thing, reached back to the mediæval woman in her, who sent her knight into battle wearing her favours. Not that she wanted young men to be killed, but only that she liked to think they were willing to be killed. Rosamund was rather like Jimmy — she really did appreciate the war, and for reasons of her own she was positively grateful for it.

"Do *you* think men like fighting?" she asked Hilary, whose gaze just then happened to encounter hers.

"Good Lord, no. I think they hate it. Most of them. I prefer to think that, at any rate."

"But then it's all the more credit to them, isn't it, when they do fight?"

"You think that makes them doubly heroes?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Don't you think so, Barbara?"

"I? Oh, quite," said Barbara, who had gone back to Stephen's black and white study of "War." "Stephen, this is good drawing. But I wish you hadn't done it."

"Why?"

"It disturbs me to remember war's really like that. The beastly thing will haunt me at night. And I don't want to be haunted. Since it has to be done one doesn't want to remember that war is — like that."

"Why can't we face the truth," Brian asked, "if the men out there can?"

"Oh, don't you see, they're *doing* something. They haven't time to think. They're not sitting still with their hands in front of them, their brains jabbing at them. It's inaction that's so dreadful."

Inaction! They seemed to consider that amusing — even Brian who wasn't easily amused, these days! Doubtless he found the business of wire-pulling a sufficiently arduous one.

"I'm the only inactive person in this set," Hilary said "unless we include Vi. And she was born that way — and probably doesn't mind."

"You know," Rosamund broke in, "I *am* so sorry for the men who can't go."

Hilary grinned at her.

"Are you really?" he said. "May we know why?"

"Oh well, it must be awful to be a man and to have to stay at home. I wouldn't be out of it for the world — if I were a man."

"Wouldn't you really?"

"I mean, it's all very fine to talk about the horrid side of war — the blood and men being killed and all that. I don't see the good of thinking too much about that. And it does bring

out the fine qualities in people. It must be sent for some good purpose, mustn't it?"

"Like smallpox and fleas, I suppose?"

Rosamund appeared not to be very disturbed by the introduction of smallpox and fleas into the argument.

"Well," she said, "just look at the brave things men do in battle. I mean, quite ordinary men that you wouldn't think had it in them. You mightn't have found it out if it hadn't been for the war. They'd just have gone on being clerks in offices or liftmen or something of that sort. I must say I do like a man to have pluck."

"It takes a certain amount of pluck, you know," Hilary told her, "to be a clerk or a liftman. They're rotten jobs, both of 'em."

"I don't see much pluck in pushing a quill or saying 'Stand clear of the gates, please.'"

"Oh, doubtless they find the war livelier," Hilary said. "Do you know, you're a cheery soul. An incurable optimist. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if you totally disagreed with Mr. Gretton's delineation of war as a monster. Hand it over, Barbara, and let her have a look at it."

Barbara handed it over.

"You any judge of art?" Hilary asked Rosamund.

"Oh no — I only know what I like, of course."

"And you don't like that, eh?"

Rosamund glanced at the drawing and the flesh of her white fat face shivered a little with disgust.

"You see," Hilary said, "you just can't stand it."

"Oh, Rosamund's one of the people like Reece — who prefer Britannia with a flag, aren't you, Rosamund? I don't know that they aren't right," and Barbara shrugged those graceful shoulders of hers again.

Rosamund said well, it would be more cheerful — than that, anyway. Seeing she was determined to regard war as a romantic asset the world couldn't really manage without, Hilary took Stephen's regrettable drawing away and decided that he was in the mood to find her amusing. It was Helena who said suddenly and fiercely that war wasn't cheerful or romantic or beautiful — or anything in fact but a horror.

"Do you know what I'd like to do?" she asked Rosamund.

"I'd like to visit every battlefield directly the battle was over. And I'd take photographs of the most awful things I saw there — the most awful things I could find: the hideous wounds, the frightful deaths . . . and what happens to women and children and old men, to whole towns and villages. And I'd do it without the very least regard for people's feelings. They wouldn't — my photos — be anything like the polite lies you see at the pictures if you go there. They wouldn't stop just when they were beginning to get painful."

Rosamund's white face shivered again with disgust.

"I don't see the use of being morbid about it," she said. "What good would all that do? Besides, what could you do with your photographs when you'd taken them?"

"I'd show them," Helena said, "to the people who haven't enough imagination to see such things for themselves. There should be public exhibitions and attendance should be compulsory."

Lieutenant Millington smiled quietly again into the fire. Rosamund rallied her forces, managed to control the shivering disgust of her too-fat face.

"Oh well," she said, "it doesn't help to lose our tempers, does it? And I'm afraid I must go. I'm 'on' early this week. You will excuse me, everybody, won't you?"

They murmured that they would. Helena, the colour in her face, got up and, without saying good night, went off to make coffee. She was in the mood to do something passionately. Those who knew their Helena felt that this evening the coffee might prove too strong. . . .

Hilary mentioned refreshment to the Fair Rosamund, who said the Richmond train service wouldn't permit of it.

"I go to South Kensington and change at Hammersmith," she informed them. "It's rather a long way."

"Jolly place, Richmond," Hilary said. "I used often to go there — before we had all these other interests to distract us. You must come to see us again. You've quite livened us up, you know. It isn't often we have such an interesting discussion about the things that matter. I don't think anyone has ever before got the lady who's making the coffee you won't stay for to talk about the war at all."

"I'm afraid, you know, we shouldn't agree. Funny, saying

nothing practically all the evening and then suddenly bursting out like that. Took my breath away. Really it did. Didn't it yours, Mrs. Bland . . . Rand? Oh, Sand, isn't it? Do you mind if I say I like that hat? I know it isn't supposed to be polite to make personal remarks."

"Oh, I don't mind," Pamela laughed. "You'll see it described in the next issue of the *Looking-Glass*. Yes, Lady Di's column. She has to describe something or other every week — and it's a long while, isn't it, since she's done a hat?"

"How jolly! I'll get it. Good-bye. Good-bye, Mr. Sargent. I'm so glad you think every man ought to fight. It's such a shame you can't go. I'm so sorry for you: I am really. What is it? Heart?"

"Er, yes. It gives me a good deal of trouble at times. Hearts do, you know. Hearts are a mistake."

"Oh, don't say that. And cheer up. I daresay the doctors won't be so strict presently, when they find out how much we want men. (Cute of Rosamund, that, at any rate, Hilary thought.) Good-bye, Mr. . . . Vincent, isn't it? You cheer up, too. I'm sure they'll pass you presently. Do you know, I was horribly afraid just at first that you were both pacifists. I'm so glad you aren't. I *do* think pacifists are ridiculous people, don't you?"

"They don't wash, either, do they?" Hilary asked.

"Oh, you've heard that, too, have you?" Rosamund looked hard at Stephen whom she had now definitely classed with the folk who were "queer," but who presented obvious difficulties when it came to including him in this other category of the unwashed. Fortunately at the moment his sense of humour seemed to be rendering him excellent service.

"It isn't a subject I'd mention to everybody, you know," he said, "but I couldn't bear you to think badly of me in that respect. The fact is I take a cold bath every morning. But perhaps you don't call that washing?"

In there at her passionate making of coffee Helena heard the sudden outburst of merriment. She was grateful for laughter, these days, for you do not laugh overmuch with a perpetual dread in your heart. Above all the rest, now, she heard Hilary's voice: it was long since she had heard him laugh like that. For some reason or other he was very gay this evening,

as though he had caught for a little while Barbara's trick of looking at the war without emotion. But that Helena would never do. Her passion of anger ran through her still, and, with shut eyes, she leaned her hot forehead against the wall as if to cool it. That awful girl — with her round white face and her senseless tongue! She wondered vaguely how Hilary could have borne to talk to her, even though she knew his trick of getting a malicious sort of amusement out of women he despised. Yet even that nice boy with the dreamer's eyes had seemed to find her amusing! Her thoughts wandered from Rosamund to him and the things Pamela had said of him, to the things he had said of himself. She wondered if he would come again — hoped that he would because he and Hilary, she thought, would get on well together. Their views about the war were almost identical. Both of them held that appalling theory about it — both insisted on their share of responsibility and — merciful Heaven! — wanted to expiate their sin of omission!

Victims, victims — everyone of them! The hot tears of pity and anger welled up beneath the shut lids, and, forgotten, the coffee boiled up and over. . . .

4

It was Hilary who took the Fair Rosamund down and ushered her forth into the quiet spring night. There were stars, which she did not notice, and no moon, which she seemed to resent. Hilary stayed down there a moment or two listening to her views on this astronomical deficiency, and when he got back to the studio Helena was bringing in the coffee.

She saw that he had a letter in his hand, and her eyes said, "For me?" Her eyes only, because there were things you didn't want everybody to know, though you couldn't prevent them from guessing.

Hilary's eyes said, "No — for me." His lips, "From Ursula I think, but there doesn't seem to be very much of it."

He held it up to the light, but seemed in no hurry to open it.

"Where on earth did you pick her up, Barbara?" he asked. "She's a pure joy."

"Rosamund, you mean? Yes, I suppose she is if you don't

have too much of her. She palls after a time, I'm afraid. I don't remember how I came to know her: she just happened along, as they say. Never seems to have anywhere much to go: thinks it rather wrong to enjoy yourself in war time. She said she liked pictures, so I brought her with me, but it's since occurred to me that she probably meant the cinema. Her mind's a blank, of course. There are hundreds of her knocking around, it seems. When I first found that out it depressed me horribly, for some reason or other; but I've got over it."

"Not bad looking," said Nelly, "if you care for that kind of thing. Good regular features."

"And a good skin," said Stephen magnanimously.

"Oh, her complexion's merely clever," Pamela told them.

Hilary laughed. "What's her name anyway? Nobody seems to have caught it."

"Too profound for you, perhaps. It's Smith. Rosamund Smith."

"The Rosamund must have been a brain wave. Smith with a 'y,' of course."

"No — with an 'e.'"

They laughed.

"Well, Smith's a good enough name to have these days," Nelly alleged. "At least the mob recognise it. You've no idea what they can make of a name like Strachan or Menzies. Or perhaps you have . . . Hallo, what's up?"

Helena turned from her coffee tray at that moment to see Hilary standing, white to the lips, with a telegraph form in his hands that he seemed to have drawn from Ursula's envelope. The cup she was handing to Lieutenant Millington found its way back on to the tray, because nobody just then was thinking of coffee. Clustered round in a little group they were staring at Hilary, and what they said came to Helena with a tinge of unreality — like voices in a mist. "*What's wrong?*" "*What's happened?*" "*Hallo, old man, bad news?*" She wondered why it was they didn't guess. Because she did. Not "guess" — that wasn't the word. She *knew*. The certainty of her knowledge rendered her for those first few seconds speechless and motionless. The coffee cups executed an idiotic dance before her eyes, the room swam, and then she found herself on the edge of the little ring of people, with Hilary handing her

the telegram over their heads, as though she were the only person he saw.

The telegram was addressed to Ursula Wyatt by the War Office and Ursula had sent it on to Hilary because, as she had pencilled across the corner, she "couldn't write about it — yet."

It was Helena, not Hilary, who announced what Ursula could not write.

"Arthur Yeomans was killed nearly a month ago . . . in Gallipoli."

It seemed as though her words turned to stone as she spoke and pressed, cold and wan, upon her. She, too, seemed to be turning to stone: she was suddenly hideously cold and frightened. She was conscious of Mark Antony stretching himself beautifully before the fire; of a quick short cry that seemed to come from Barbara; of horror settling itself down crudely upon the anxious faces around her, and of Hilary standing there in the midst of them, both hands pressed tightly over his eyes. . . .

5

They went, all of them, almost immediately, leaving the coffee to get cold in Hilary's tall blue pot.

Afterwards Helena could not remember saying goodnight to any of them. She only remembered that Hilary hadn't moved; that one by one they had fallen away from him, calling out a soft goodnight as they went. All save Barbara, who had gone up to him and touched his arm.

"Don't," she said, "don't. It's all over — for him. He's dead and he doesn't suffer any longer. And he had the death he would have wished."

"It's a lie," Helena thought. "Nobody could possibly wish to die — like that." She looked at Barbara — saw that her face was white, her hands clenched, and remembering that little instinctive cry she had a sudden rush of pity and admiration. But Hilary gave no sign that he had heard. And presently Barbara went. With the closing of the door Helena's fugitive feeling of pity fled and a spurt of anger came up in its place, because Barbara seemed never, these days, to feel anything at all — because she could look unbroken upon this mon-

strous thing that had overtaken the world. She was like the man who boasts in his club that he has "given six sons."

And yet, so Hilary had always maintained, she had cared for Arthur Yeomans. . . .

6

She coaxed him presently to the armchair by the fire: switched off the light, too gay for sorrow, and sat there at his feet, her forehead pressed in wordless sympathy against his knee. Mark Antony slept on in the silence and the loitering shadows climbed slowly up and down the walls and over their quiet figures. Neither spoke. She would have died just then to have been able to comfort him, and he seemed almost to have forgotten she was there. But when (after a long time) he remembered, he sat up and took her into his arms.

"Oh, my dear," he said, "you do see, don't you, that this . . . settles it?"

She nodded, choked into silence by an unexpected passion of tears. She had always understood this day must come, but she had not known she would shed tears. It had always seemed that, somehow, she must be braver than that.

But though she said nothing Hilary knew she did "see." Between them argument and pleading were at an end: silence possessed them and sad-hearted acquiescence, while Helena cried softly on Hilary's shoulder.

CHAPTER THREE

1

THE greater part of the next day — which was Whit-Sunday — they spent putting things in order, stacking pictures up against the walls and on shelves, doing queer things with favourite brushes that must be neglected but must not be spoiled: burning letters which were better burned (a painful process, this — like burning some part of yourself) and writing others to the people who mattered — to Ursula, to Ronnie at Salisbury, to Brian, Stephen and the rest. Because Hilary was going at once — if they would have him. Next Saturday when the “Remnant” came they would find Helena there alone. His little notes asked them particularly to go on coming as usual because Helena must have a lot of company. . . . He wasn't going, if he could help it, to give her much time for thinking. . . .

It was his idea, too, that Helena should remain at the studio. The rent was paid (thanks to Hilary's short way with accounts) for some months ahead, and someone might as well live in it. There was nobody but Helena, it appeared, with whom he would leave his pictures lying about like that; nobody, either, with whom he would trust Mark Antony. So that, at least, was settled.

“What about a stroll?” Hilary said presently. “It's a nice evening.”

It was, but out there in the streets newsboys were shouting that Italy had declared war on Austria. Everyone seemed to find that a particularly heartening circumstance. But this evening it did not seem to matter — much — to Helena who else was to be in the war now that Hilary was.

On the following day (which was Whit-Monday) they tried walking in Surrey. But it was the least successful walk they had ever taken. There was, of course, everything against its being successful, but chiefly there was that desperate common intention to put a good face upon things. The worst of putting a good face upon things is that it tires you out so soon and so utterly. And certainly Helena was tired when they reached home, with that terrible tiredness that is three-parts fatigue of the spirit. Hilary made her put up her feet while he bustled round with tea and poked at his newly built fire, thinking she was cold. She was, but it wasn't a fire which would warm her.

Before the meal was over Evey dropped in with Estelle, *en route* for the Wigmore Hall. Estelle, these days, was a grumpy moody child for whom no adventures were left. Music had been an adventure and the German professors and Desirée. . . . And the thought of Leipsic. And they were all gone. Helena watched her lure Hilary over to his Blüthner and keep him there — ostensibly, at least, he stayed to defend the English musician against Estelle's quite vicious onslaughts. Little bits of it all reached Helena and Evey. Names drifted across to them — Elgar, Joseph Holbrook, John Ireland and Ethel Smyth. And in the middle of it Evey (who wasn't a scrap interested in the musicians) said suddenly to Helena (who wasn't either):

“What on earth's the matter, Lena? Aren't you well?”

“I'm always well.”

“But you look like a ghost.”

Colour came into the ghost's white face.

“Let's take these into the kitchen. We can talk there,” Helena said, motioning Hilary back from his attempted rescue of the tray. “It's all right, dear. You stay there with Estelle.”

Evey, leading the way into the kitchen, reflected that this was the first time she had ever heard Helena call Hilary “dear.” None so chary as they of their verbal endearments in company! Behind the barrier of the closed kitchen door Helena explained things without preamble to Evey, who said at the end of it, “Oh, Lena, you *ought* to have kept him out.”

"I couldn't possibly do that."

"Someone ought. He isn't the sort. Phil said that long ago. You can't imagine Hilary out there in that . . . mess. He'll hate it."

"I know. But then, don't all the others? I haven't any right to demand preferential treatment for someone I — love."

Helena began putting the teacups in the bowl, her pale face averted from Evey, who said nothing because the only words she could think of seemed suddenly to have lost their meaning.

There at the sink Helena said unexpectedly,

"You know, don't you, all about things?"

"Your things?"

"Ours — mine and Hilary's."

"I guessed. Why didn't you tell me, Lena?"

"I ought to have done. Hilary would have it that way. You see, he minded so much . . . at first . . . that we couldn't get married."

"Aren't you ever going to?"

"We can't. Jerome won't release me."

"Why not?"

"The old reason. If I won't belong to him: . . ." She shrugged her shoulders, only ever so slightly, because it wasn't a trick of hers, nor one she admired.

"Do you mind very dreadfully?"

"I don't mind at all . . . deep down. It doesn't seem to matter. It never has. It complicates things, of course. But that's different."

Evey nodded.

"But complications can be horrid. They get in the way. It isn't nice to be cut by your relatives. Of course yours have cut you?"

"Long ago . . . except my brother . . . the youngest one, Walter. He's been tremendously understanding and kind. So has Cissie . . . the girl he's going to marry — if he comes back. He's in the thick of it."

"France?"

Helena nodded.

"It's funny how little all that 'other' has hurt. It was like a skin wound . . . the bleeding soon stopped. Somehow, it just hasn't mattered. Nothing has, you see."

She poured hot water on her teacups and began to turn them down to drain.

"What will you do now, Lena?"

"God knows."

"But do *you*?"

"I shall go on living here — and there's my work."

"Mr. Bletchington's work?"

Helena nodded. Evey seized a towel and began to dry the cups and saucers.

"Isn't he a trial, these days? Phil says he's one of those people who have helped to bring this war about — created the atmosphere which made it possible."

"With Germany, you mean?"

"Yes. It is strange, isn't it, how soon it developed into an Anglo-German war. It didn't start like that."

"I daresay Phil's right," Helena said, her mind on the back files of the *Britisher*. "Germany's probably got a few Mr. Bletchingtons of its own. But it isn't war he's talking about just now. It's God — not a very nice sort of God, somehow."

"Mr. Bletchington's God wouldn't be," Evey said. "Even if he didn't run him as a limited liability company."

"Very limited," agreed Helena. "His outlook's positively appalling."

On that, however, Mr. Bletchington's patronage of the Almighty as a topic of conversation fizzled out, for neither Helena nor Evey was really interested in Mr. Bletchington. He was just a symptom, a sign and token of a world terribly out of joint. It was like discussing one's bodily ailments to talk of him. Evey cursed him as she hung her damp towel over a chair.

"Is Hilary applying for a commission?" she inquired.

"No, he'll join as a private."

"That's good. Far less risk, so Phil says. I'm glad you insisted on that."

"I didn't," Helena said, "I didn't even think of it. It was always understood that if he joined it would be as a private. You see, he hates the caste of the Army. It hurts the democrat in him, he says."

"I should have thought everything about the Army did that," Evey said.

But Helena's thoughts had moved on.

"For Heaven's sake, Evey, don't tell him Phil thinks there's less risk as a private."

"You think he might alter his mind?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. I'm afraid. Of everything. And Hilary's so quixotic. He takes the war so badly. There was a young lieutenant here the other night — a poet, quite a good one too. E. T. M. of the *Monitor*. Phil would know. Pamela brought him with her. Of course she talked the usual warrior rubbish about him. But he wasn't a bit like that, really. You could see he hated the war; he was talking about it just as Hilary does; he would have it that he had a personal share in the responsibility for it. I know Phil takes that line, but it seems to me such awful nonsense."

"Don't you think we all are responsible — up to a point? Not individually, perhaps, but as a community — a social group? It was up to us to do better. None of us cared enough. When we do, things get altered."

Helena shook her head. She had "cared" all her life, not definitely, perhaps, about war, but at least generally about the system which most people were agreed produced it. Not the people who painted some nations completely white and others completely black, of course; but still, a fair proportion of people who did honestly want to arrive at the truth.

"We couldn't have done anything," she said, "the foundations of this war were laid by old men . . . when we were in our cradles. You can't dodge the inevitable. No amount of 'caring' could do it. Certain things happen if certain things are done. It's inexorable — like the law of gravity. Phil cared, but what could he do? It doesn't make any difference *how* much you care — except that you suffer more. It isn't nice to suffer. Perhaps that's why most people don't care at all."

"People don't know. . . ."

"Do you think they'd care if they did? Do you think they'd revolt? English people don't. The war has killed my belief in democracy. I can't see that the men who are dying out there aren't liberators or rescuers of the oppressed or anything at all but helpless victims of an iniquitous system. Even the men who are fighting don't see it."

"Some of them do. Hilary sees it — or will. Phil sees it. That nice poet youth sees it. . . ."

"Victims!" said Helena, "Victims!"

Her white face showed suffering and a certain hopelessness. She dropped like a wind-flower in a hothouse. Something in face and attitude pulled Evey up sharp.

"Lena," she said, "don't think I don't care . . . but one just must not care too much if one's going to live at all. Barbara's right there, anyhow. We've got to set our teeth and bear it."

"Victims!" Helena said again. "We, too. All of us — a world of victims!" She hung up her overall behind the door, and turning flung her arms suddenly round Evey's neck. "Oh, Evey, Evey, it's horrible. Just think. It's going on now . . . at this moment — and we can't stop it. We can't do anything."

"Don't, don't," Evey said. "Try not to think. It doesn't help."

"Nothing helps — I know that."

"One helps oneself — in time."

"*In time!*" Helena said, "with every day coming on like a century!" She reached out valiantly for composure: raised her head and with cold hands that trembled readjusted the mask. "Let's go in, shall we?"

3

They went in.

"Lena's told me," Evey said to Hilary down at the door. "Good-bye and good luck."

Estelle said, "Oh, you're not going too, are you?"

Estelle had her own ideas of excitement: they did not run to khaki and military bands.

"Yes, I am," Hilary told her, and thought how nice she was to look at, and what a handful she must be to the people who owned her. But it was Evey's serious eyes that remained in his memory when Estelle's insouciant beauty was forgotten. That same evening he suggested that Helena should have Evey to live with her when he had gone. The hideous finality of his phrase took Helena's breath away, but she assented.

"Evey," she said, "wouldn't mind being bundled off when you came home . . . on leave."

“You think I’d like her ‘bundled off’?”

She said that she thought *she* would, anyway.

They left it at that, having just then so many other things to think of, but also because Hilary was suddenly aware of the new frightening look about Helena. He was awed by the white austerity of her: saw her face as if it were graven in stone — as though the sphinx might call her daughter. He realised the effort things were costing her — guessed that in there in the kitchen, whilst he had laughed with Estelle, the white mask had been lifted; that Evey had seen beneath the stone. She suffered — and nobody could help her. Nobody could help either of them. . . .

Victims! Victims . . . bound and delivered! His youth and passion sobbed out its bitter protest.

Hilary certainly would have agreed, there, with Helena’s *obiter dicta!*

4

They sat there long into the night, gazing into the fire: hoping for the future, remembering the past. . . .

For whatever happened they had had ten months of happiness that could not be taken from them. They regretted nothing. It was strange (or wasn’t it, perhaps?) how, in the light of this catastrophe which had overtaken the world, all the old scruples had vanished. Nothing of all that mattered any longer.

Presently, nothing mattered at all, save that after this they had, somehow, to live without each other, and that Good-bye, stern-visaged, inexorable, waited for them on the windy plains of Circumstance. They went out presently to do battle with it, met it with brave eyes and lips that smiled. . . .

And then in the morning it stood before them again, unconquered and with a bitterer countenance. Dressed and ready for the office Helena met its renewed challenge without hope, knowing herself vanquished, striving only to keep calm the face she raised for Hilary’s last kiss, and suddenly appalled by the tide of misery that swept over her as his arms came round her. She pulled herself free with a sob in her throat, yet managed to smile at him from the doorway, bringing to this last minute all the reserves she had, emptying herself. . . .

It took, she found, a certain amount of courage to open the

front door and let herself out into the bright May morning, to fall in — an unconcerned unit — among those quiet figures on the pavement.

During that short journey to the office the world of women divided itself sharply into two — those who had said good-bye to the men they loved and those who had not.

5

And then Helena had to say hers all over again, because they sent Hilary back that night, with orders to report at ten-thirty the next morning, when he and the rest of this latest batch of recruits were proceeding to Essex. This, it seemed, was a way they had in the Army. It had a lot of "ways," you found, very few of which commended themselves to you.

But they smiled at the anti-climax the War Office had thrust upon them — and were tremendously grateful to it for having made it Essex. Helena, because Essex was not so very far away, because it came easily within the limits of the commercial "week-end": and Hilary for that reason and because he knew you got wonderful sunsets in Essex. It rather looked, Helena thought, as though it had occurred to him that painting and war might perhaps go together, after all — if you were wearing khaki.

He even went so far (on that odd evening the War Office had thrown him) as to turn "Interior" again to the light, as though he meant to try to work at it. But it remained there on his easel untouched, and in the morning Helena watched him cover it up and turn it back again to the wall.

Just at first when he came home on leave it was an operation he repeated. But he never added anything to it nor took anything away, and after a while he ceased to disturb it. He seemed so quickly to find that the khaki made no difference at all — that, for him, at least, war and painting, do what he might, would never "mix."

CHAPTER FOUR

I

SUMMER came — a thing extravagant and useless, too sweet to be borne. . . . Somehow Helena got through June and July, grateful for Evey's companionship and for Estelle's music, sad at heart all the time, but mostly too busily occupied to remember it. And grateful, always, for the thought of Essex, and the memory of a fugitive week-end she had spent there — six miles from the Camp, unfortunately, because there were other people grateful for Essex and desirous of contriving week-ends.

In London — Heaven alone knew why! — people were taking bets that the war would end by Christmas. Meantime, it went on. London had suffered its first raid. In Gallipoli there had been a British and French advance; the Austro-Germans had captured Lemberg and German South-West Africa was in Allied hands.

Helena went on with her work; Mr. Bletchington with his. Week by week the *Britisher* appeared — a perpetual exercise in futility. . . .

It was a queer world — even apart from the war — with the pendulum of events swinging wide; so that at the Old Bailey there was a man named Smith being tried for the murder of three "wives," and at the Coliseum Lydia Kyasht danced beautifully. . . .

People came (as Hilary had asked them) to see Helena and Evey. Brian, who liked Helena and could be fairly sure of meeting Vivien there on a Saturday evening, came quite regularly. He continued to apply himself industriously to the pulling of strings, sometimes with hope, sometimes not, but always with determination. Ragtime, as a hobby, took second-place these days to the new queer one of being medically examined. The doctors still said "no," but Brian cherished the unalter-

able conviction that they must sooner or later get tired of it and say "yes" for a change. Meantime his friends discovered for him a strong vein of unsuspected optimism, and Brian that the pleasing legend concerning the Englishman's love of his bath was in nowise founded on fact. But then, as Barbara pointed out, Brian had all the contempt of the man who takes a cold water bath each morning for the man who does not.

Less often than Brian — perhaps because of Brian — Stephen Gretton came. He talked to Helena and Evey of the things nobody else would listen to and brought them messages from Stella at Brighton. Sometimes he went out on Saturday afternoons with Helena and Evey to Kew or Richmond; but not too often, because young men in mufti did not really care for walking abroad these days — and besides, Kew and Richmond made Helena sad. He painted few pictures and sold fewer; went to meetings and helped sometimes to pass Resolutions. Sometimes not. Either way, Stephen's life did not sound too exciting. . . .

Just occasionally, when she had an evening to spare, Pamela would look in upon them. Busier than ever was Pamela in the summer of nineteen-fifteen, with her hours marked out with the clarity of a war-map by determined Colonials, who liked to be seen about with her. You really couldn't blame them for that.

Barbara Feilding, grown quieter of late and less than ever inclined to talk of the war, came (as she always had done) when you least expected her; and sometimes she brought Rosamund, who wanted details of Hilary's venturing but lost interest when she heard he had joined as a private. Denis remained in Ireland, contributing opinions about Irish affairs to his "leading morning paper," which you might read if it happened, of course, to be the particular paper you affected. Not that it mattered very much because Barbara was probably right when she said that what Denis really thought and felt about Ireland would be not in his articles but in the letters he never wrote.

Olive and Dagmar came sometimes together, with a lot of jolly tales about the Wounded (they spelt it like that, you felt, with a capital W); and about queer things which happen in hospitals. They both wore V. A. D. uniforms and were apt to become lyrical upon nursing as a sweated profession. (At

least Olive became lyrical, Dagmar making a fairly successful chorus, which was less exhausting.) They had made the mutual and interesting discovery that all nurses at some time or other suffered from varicose veins, and Olive, it seemed, was constantly in trouble for sitting down when on duty. You gathered that she sat down less because she was tired or afraid of varicose veins than because one had to make a protest against a cast iron and inhuman system, and, also, because she *liked* making a protest.

A cheerful person, Olive — with no theories and no dismal thoughts, but with a boundless energy and a sunny spirit. Art knew her, these days, not at all (which was a good thing for art, so Hilary said in his letters); she divided her time equally between attending the Wounded in hospital, having them to tea and giving them concerts (at which Vivien would never play). You felt, somehow, that the Wounded rather liked it — and Olive. Or liked it because of Olive, perhaps.

And on two memorable occasions Lieutenant Millington came again.

2

Out of her busy days Helena wrote regularly to Hilary. Of the books she read, the plays she saw, the concerts they attended with Estelle — and her free tickets. Of the other things she and Evey found to do and the things they talked of o' nights. Of the sweetness and wonder of Evey and the joy of having her there like that at the studio. Of Barbara, who wouldn't talk of the war, of Pamela, who would, and of Brian and the ropes he pulled; of Vivien and the violin you couldn't get her to play, and of walks. Of Mark Antony, grown resigned to his lonely days and given to wandering about looking for Hilary in unlikely corners and under impossible things. Of London and Surrey and Bucks. And sometimes (but not often) of Richmond and Kew. Of the "Deirdre" picture, and of a letter from the Secretary of the Draycott Galley inquiring if Hilary's determination not to sell was adamant. Of its subsequent return when he said that it was; and of the startling way it looked across at you in the studio. (A good deal of this because pictorial art was still black magic and black magic is a fascinating

topic). Of Phil's dispatches, which made terrible reading, and of his letters which did not, because Evey and the Censor would have it so; and of places she and Evey discovered between them (like the Ethical Church at Pimlico and a sweep's house off Moorgate Street that had flower boxes at the window and might have stepped out of Surrey). Of Conrad who had been home on leave and cared no longer for Dagmar. Of the *Britisher* and the fatherliness of Mr. Bletchington; of his new strange views on religion and of his unlovely and unlovable God. Of Stephen, who was dreadfully hard up and holding on to his unpopular ideals with both hands. Of Ronnie who had been home on leave, and of Lieutenant Millington who had gone to France. . . .

And sometimes — though not often, because this wasn't the sort of letter that helped, nor that a soldier really wanted — about the emptiness of things; the memory of the Essex week-end and the difficulty of waiting for the leave Hilary was going, some day, to get.

Hilary knew, when he got a letter of this sort, that she thought him less clever than Ronnie who had managed this question of leave so much better.

He liked her to admire Ronnie, who needed admiration and letters these days, because Salisbury Plain was not exactly festive and Pamela was not given to rushing down there for occasional week-ends. Pamela, of course, preferred Chelsea, Piccadilly and the Savoy. Anybody would.

3

From Essex Hilary wrote of the dull things he was doing there, and of the people he was with, who were less dull, you gathered, or, rather, not dull at all. Of drills and sergeants, of route marches, of strange new companions ("good sorts" mostly). Of rifles (an extensive subject in which Helena wasn't interested) and of Essex landscapes (in which she was). And of the memory of a recent week-end; of "Interior," and of the leave he was going — some day — to get.

And sometimes (but not too often) of Themselves and Love and days that being dead were yet alive. . . .

Meanwhile the fighting round Ypres went on; train-loads of

wounded steamed heavily into the London termini, and Ronnie Sand went out to France.

4

It was on a Thursday in mid-July that Pamela in a state of tremendous excitement rushed in and asked Helena and Evey if they had seen the papers. They said they had seen as much of them as they wanted to see; and what, particularly, had they missed?

An account, it seems, of an act of conspicuous bravery performed by Lieutenant Millington, who had saved the life of one of his men while they held some impossible position on some impossible ridge. Millington was wounded — not too badly — and was in hospital at the base. As soon as he was well enough he was coming home to be decorated, for, of course, they were giving him the Victoria Cross.

“I’m tremendously proud of him, aren’t you?” Pamela said.

They were, of course, but they wished Pamela would go. She did soon, because she had an appointment for dinner with an Australian, and another for Saturday with a Canadian; which meant she wouldn’t be seeing them that evening. They would try, they said, to bear up, and asked for news of Ronnie, who had been in France a week. Pamela had heard from him that morning. She reported him as well and cheery, then recollected her waiting Australian and fled.

After she had gone they looked up the morning paper and hunted for the paragraph they had missed at breakfast, while Evey said irrelevantly that she thought Pamela was rather overdoing the Colonies. Helena agreed, but absent-mindedly, because having found and read the paragraph she was suddenly overwhelmingly glad that Lieutenant Millington had gained his V. C. not for destroying but for saving life. V. C.’s gained for killing a number of the enemy she was apt to find depressing, especially if the number were carefully specified — as it frequently was. It must be horrible, she thought, to know just how many men you had killed — even in a good cause. The mediæval woman in Helena, it seems, was a long way out of reach.

She pinned the paragraph to the top of the letter she had

just finished writing to Hilary and took Evey off with her to post it.

On her way home from the office a day or two later she bought a copy of the *Monitor* and found it contained three short poems over the familiar initials "E. T. M." The poems startled her, because they were no longer about "the country and all that"—hunting and walking and games—but about war and blood and sudden death, and bayonet charges. . . .

They were the first poems Helena had ever seen Evey appreciate unreservedly. It was strange, because Evey—like Helena and Vivien—detested books and poems about the war. But Edmund Talbot Millington gave you the war with a difference. The biggest difference—as yet—of any.

Perhaps that explained it. Evey liked looking at the truth—a good habit, in Phil's opinion, which he encouraged, so that he was probably not surprised to receive the *Monitor* pages containing the poems sandwiched in between the next letter from Evey. All the same, he told Evey not to do anything so risky again: the poems might have got lost, or the Censor might have objected to them, which would have come to the same thing. So Evey (obeying Phil's instructions) bought another copy of the *Monitor*, stuck the three poems neatly in an exercise book with stickphast and kept an eye on subsequent issues.

5

There were three more poems in the next issue, terrible, haunting, ironic things—about generals poring over maps, moving regiments of men hither and thither like pawns in a gigantic, never-ending game; and about the men who were the pawns and about the people who stayed at home. Most of all, perhaps, about them.

Barbara disliked them—not the people who stayed at home, but the poems. She thought them clever and misguided—like Stephen's line-drawing of "War." It simply didn't do to stress this side of things. She thought it plucky of Harvey to publish them; wondered why he had and wished he hadn't. But she went down to Buckingham Palace to see the author of them decorated, perhaps with an idea of talking to him about them; but she had no chance of that. He was surrounded by an

admiring mother and sister who guarded him jealously from contact with any lesser mortals after he had shaken his sovereign's hand. So Barbara came home and reported that he looked ill, wore his left arm in a sling and no air (thank Heaven) of the Almighty Hero.

Pamela (who had also been to see the ceremony) said of course not — he was so tremendously modest. Pamela wasn't in the least concerned about the *Monitor* poems, because she hadn't seen them, and wouldn't have worried about them anyhow, because worrying was not a habit of hers.

From Essex Hilary wrote that they were the first real poems of the war, and that he had written to Millington to tell him so. They were so real, in fact, that if you pricked them they would bleed. Here at last was war with the romance off — and it was hideous. So hideous that people would not care to look at it, would cry out for the familiar veils and trappings that had been snatched from it. And because poetry had become a thing divorced from life — a thing extraneous to it — we should be told that these poems in the *Monitor* were not poems at all, because poetry ought to recreate beauty, and these didn't. And the critics would probably quote Keats, because when you got them on this topic the critics always did! The one line, of course, which would prove nothing.

Thus Hilary, and a good deal more to the same effect, because Hilary felt strongly on the subject and let himself go.

Then, quite unexpectedly, he came home on leave; and Evey went off in a hurry to Streatham, and summer had a sudden brief meaning again.

6

On that evening of homecoming they sat up much too late talking of a thousand things — of the Millington poems, the Millington V. C. (about which Hilary agreed with Helena); of the Roscoe dispatches, the "wonderfulness" of Evey, the Colonials of Pamela Sand, and of Ronnie in France. Of Brian's wire-pulling and the "queerness" of Vivien who seemed not to see, or, seeing, not to mind; of Stephen's ideals, Stephen's wife, and of the baby that was coming. (It was a mistake, they agreed, to get born in war time, but hoped the

baby would never find it out.) And presently they talked of nothing save the wonder of being together again. And, presently, not even of that. . . .

They crowded a century of happiness into that tiny period of time, so gloriously alive to the present that knowledge of the past and thought of the future ebbed away like a tide. They spent their Saturday walking beneath showery skies in the Chilterns, and only got back just in time to prevent Nelly and Barbara (who had arrived early to find nobody at home) from going away again. Later on Brian came and Vivien, and, later still, Stephen. But they were thoughtful people and went early — even Evey who had come up especially from Streatham and would dearly have loved to have stayed and slept on the blue divan, or on the floor, or a shelf — or anywhere so long as she could be near these two people she adored.

On Sunday morning they went to Kew and had lunch beneath the trees, but there was no sketching. (The showery weather bore the blame for this, of course, which was convenient, if a trifle unfair to the weather, that really did make a commendable effort to behave decently.) Kew smelt of late tea-roses and mignonette, of China asters and sweet damp earth, and once, magically, of wood violets, too well hidden to be discoverable. After lunch they followed the gleaming river into Richmond, found a familiar shop for tea and fought for a 'bus at the bottom of the hill. By the time they reached home the weather had given up struggling and was definitely wet. But it made no difference to Helena and Hilary because they would have spent the time indoors, anyway, and weather was the last thing in the world to depress them.

And they forgot the Camp and the coming morning, and the absence of their friends (though not so successfully, because of Jimmy and Arthur for whom the absence was eternal). They admired the returned "Deirdre" and were glad Hilary had refused to sell her. And they remembered love and the sweet enduring things of love the war had turned to the wall; dared, even, to raise the curtain behind which they had bundled so much that was beautiful, that they could not forget and must not (too often) remember. . . .

Two whole days of perfect happiness they filched from niggardly Time that week-end at the close of July — two days that

proved all the things that had been proved so often and so completely before — that life centred for each in the other; that apart they had only their love and faith to keep the days possible, to keep hope dancing in the wind of Circumstance — though it danced high up, high up and out of reach, like Coleridge's "one red leaf on the topmost bough."

But Monday came, because nothing, unfortunately, can prevent it from coming, and in the morning they walked down to Liverpool Street through the faintly stirring City streets, and Helena stood on a platform amid a sea of khaki and thought what a hideous colour it was, and how badly suited to most people's complexion.

And the sun came down into the gloomy station and lighted her up as she stood there, flushed from the ticket adventure and smiling and cheerful, because one had to be that — somehow — to the last, and must not think of the empty days that were coming back again. Only, perhaps, less empty than before, because of this new memory that would take a lot of dimming. Moreover, hope danced a little more lightly on the top of its tree just now, because more people than ever were willing to wager that the war would be over by Christmas. When the leaf danced most lightly and most frequently it was because some intrepid gambler had put it at the Autumn or referred definitely to "September." You might wonder why they did it, but you couldn't help feeling optimistic when they did.

Presently (only much too soon and tragically punctually) Hilary's train steamed noisily out of the station, and Helena stood and looked and looked until there was nothing left to look at, when she walked out of the station, got on a 'bus and rode Chelseawards.

And in Chelsea there was Mark Antony — puzzled and hungry — and a note from Pamela which said that Ronnie had been wounded and was in hospital at Sidcup. Pamela sounded cheerful; but then Pamela always did, of course. Helena hoped it was all right but could not help being glad the news had not arrived until after Hilary's departure.

While she ate her breakfast she snuggled Mark Antony up closely against her and explained to him that it was really a very clever thing to do to get a Blighty wound after only three weeks of France. Only Blighty wounds, of course, must not

be too serious. And then, because Mark Antony was one of those cats who loved conversation and understood every word you said, she told him he was a lucky creature because he knew nothing of war and had not heard of the Rockefeller Institute.

7

Thoughts of Ronnie, down there in Sidcup with his "Blighty" wound, haunted her all day, however, and because she couldn't get Pamela on the 'phone she went round to see her and collect any news there was on her way home.

Melton, Pamela's maid, let her in and told her she would find Mrs. Sand dressing in her room. She was dining out. There had been no news from Sidcup during the day, but a letter had arrived for Mrs. Sand five minutes ago.

Helena went upstairs and found Pamela on the floor having hysterics and being horribly sick. Ronnie, she thought, must be dead, and she steeled herself for the worst, seeing already in imagination the fact as it would look when she wrote it out for Hilary. Jimmy, Arthur, Ronnie. . . .

Pamela, making all that noise on the floor, had not heard her come in, so that she was able to stand for a moment just inside the door, wondering vaguely why life was so hideous, and how she was going to tell Hilary. Her eyes rested mechanically on the frock Pamela had taken off and flung over the rail of the old Queen Anne bedstead, and on the evening gown of blue which Melton had laid out with shoes and stockings for Pamela to glorify. And she lay there in the midst of things, forgetful of the Colonial who would have liked the blue gown (and her in it), and making horrible noises.

She sat up presently in her camisole and petticoat and looked at Helena. Her hair was loosened, the tears ran down her face unceasingly. Her pretty mouth, slightly open, emitted short, painful gasps; her weeping eyes were wide and scared. She looked like a child who has been suddenly and horribly frightened, frightened almost to death.

And Helena could think of nothing at all, save that Ronnie must be dead.

But Ronnie wasn't. She got that presently out of Pamela. Ronnie was only wounded — but most inartistically. They had

removed an arm and a leg — a right arm, so that he would never paint again (though Pamela didn't seem to have thought of that) — and something had happened to his face. The nurse who had written the letter Pamela gave her to read had been careful, there, about what she said. But no matter what she said, or rather, what she omitted to say, the hideous truth got through. Besides, Pamela knew that it was the men with facial disfigurements who got sent to Sidcup. Pamela always did know things of that sort. . . .

And while Helena read the letter again to see if she could make anything else of it, Pamela sank back to her sickness and hysterics on the floor. Helena remembered how Hilary had said, once, that Pamela could be sick whenever she liked. It was absurd, of course; but all the same it got in the way, now, of the sympathy she wanted to feel for Pamela.

"Get up," she said presently, "that won't help."

She found it difficult to be kind to people who were having hysterics. Besides, at this moment, hysterics got most dreadfully in the way. Ronnie was down there in Sidcup, asking all the time for Pamela — so that nurse said. She put it nicely, not wanting to hurt their feelings. They all thought it would do him good to see Pamela, but she must be prepared for a very great change. Doubtless she had said that to a lot of other people . . . poor thing, you couldn't possibly imagine she *liked* the task.

And Pamela lay here half-dressed on the floor, when she ought to have been on her way to Sidcup. Sidcup, thank Heaven, wasn't far. Suppose it were Dover they had taken Ronnie to? A scrap of *vers libre* from some modern poet ran, zigzagging, through her mind:

. . . Dover
 Is such a long way from Victoria
 . . . and your boy is dying,
 Dying at Dover.
 Two hours to wait.

But Ronnie was at Sidcup. You could get a suburban service to Sidcup. And Ronnie was not dying. There was a lot to be thankful for. . . .

Presently Pamela stopped being sick and paused in her hys-

terics and sat up. Helena found her another handkerchief, shut cupboard doors and did other odd things that she thought might restore Pamela's self-respect, which was certainly at a very low ebb.

"We'd better look up trains," she said. "How long before you can start?"

"Start? I can't start," said Pamela. "I'm ill . . . Can't you see I'm ill? Anybody would be ill. . . ."

"I know," Helena said gently, "it's a dreadful shock for you. But it's Ronnie you've got to think of . . . that we've all got to think of. You haven't time to be ill."

Pamela said nothing, but the tears began to flow down her cheeks again; her mouth trembled pathetically.

"Oh, don't, don't," Helena said, "do try not to cry."

She was suddenly infinitely sorry — had not believed Pamela cared — like that. She came and knelt down at her side.

"We're wasting time, dear, and it's precious, every minute of it. Ronnie wants you, and you sit here . . . crying. And I let you. What is the matter with us?"

"It's no good, Lena. I *can't* go. I would if I could . . . but I just can't. I'm afraid."

"What of?"

Pamela said nothing — only hid her face against Helena's shoulder and shuddered.

"What are you afraid of, Pamela?"

"The hospital . . . the awful sights. . . ."

"You'll see nothing at all but Ronnie . . . when you get there."

"The thing that *was* Ronnie!"

"Oh, Pamela — don't!"

"I can't help it, I can't. . . . That's how I'm made. If I went I should be sick . . . and how would that help Ronnie?"

"He wants you — and you're going to let your nerves stand in the way. Or is it your stomach?"

Pamela sat up suddenly and pushed Helena's protecting shoulder away.

"Oh, I know," she said, "you despise me. You're different. I can't stand horrors: they make me sick. I'm not sick because I like it. You're never sick. You don't understand. You don't . . . see."

Helena got up from the floor and stood looking down at Pamela, who was tearing with her teeth at one corner of her handkerchief. There was genuine anger in action and voice, for Helena's use of that ridiculous word "stomach" had broken down the bulwark of Pamela's hitherto impregnable amiability.

"I don't," Helena said, "I'm afraid I don't see anything except that you won't try to conquer a bad attack of . . . nerves . . . for Ronnie." Her sympathy, now that she saw it was herself Pamela was thinking of, and not Ronnie, was disappearing. She galvanised it into action again, forcing the hard note out of her voice, trying to speak gently. "Listen, dear. Here is someone you love. They've taken him away from you . . . now they've given him back. And you're going to grumble because they've smashed him up a bit. You ought to be grateful . . . on any terms. Just to get him! And think! They've spoilt him so much they'll never want to take him again. You will be able to keep him . . . always . . . whatever wars they make."

Pamela stopped biting at her handkerchief and sat there squeezing it into a ball, the tears, unheeded, falling down and down her face. It was incredible to Helena that anybody could go on crying like that — almost automatically, as though the reason for crying had long been forgotten or didn't matter.

"It's no good. I can't . . . I can't . . . I can't," she sobbed.

Helena left her to go and look for an A B C. She knew where one was to be found, and coming back with it sat down to look up trains. The blue enamel hands of the little pewter clock on the mantelshelf showed the hour as twenty minutes past six. On the floor Pamela continued her automatic crying.

The A B C looked at first as though it were going to prove useless. It told Helena that Sidcup was in Kent (which she already knew); that it was twelve and a half miles from Charing Cross station (which she didn't) and that you saved tuppence if you went from Cannon Street; but it seemed to have nothing to say as to the service of trains. She found a table of Sidcup trains eventually, however, lumped in with a lot of other suburban schedules at the end of the book (where she ought to have looked for them before), and ran a quick businesslike finger over the columns.

"There's a train at 7.36," she said, "from Charing Cross. You must catch that."

"I can't possibly. I can't catch any train — to-night, anyhow. I'm not fit. I shall be ill in the train."

"I'll come with you. You'll be all right."

"I shan't. I feel as though I shall be ill for days."

"You mustn't let yourself be ill. You must forget yourself." She nearly added, "For once."

Pamela fell to tearing at the handkerchief again with her teeth.

"It's all very well for you to talk. You haven't any nerves . . . and you're never ill. Besides, it isn't *your* husband they've sent back to you a horror."

"My *dear!* Can't you *really* stand a few bandages? Oh, you're ungrateful, Pamela, ungrateful. Things might be so much worse. . . . Ronnie might be dead." Something hot boiled up within her, bubbled over uncontrollably. "Do you want me to say I think you wish he were?"

"I don't care what you say . . . and p'raps it's true. It would be better for Ronnie to be dead than . . . like that."

"Better for you, I think you mean."

"You can think what you like. I don't care. I'm too miserable to care about anything. Besides, you don't understand . . . you don't *see*."

"You've told me that before, and I've agreed with you. Now, will you tell me what you're going to wear . . . and where I can find things? You'll have to hurry."

"It's impossible, Lena. I can't go. I'm not fit. Anybody would see that but you. Ronnie'd understand. . . . You can't *drag* me there."

"I can . . . if necessary."

"You're a beast, Lena — an unsympathetic beast."

"I'm trying to be sympathetic. You make it difficult. Do let us forget ourselves. . . . It's only Ronnie who matters now, not you . . . not me. Can't you do something for *him*? Get up from the floor and try." She dragged a dark-blue costume out of Pamela's wardrobe, a white blouse out of a drawer. Pamela got up and sat weakly on the edge of the bed, fingering the silk of the evening gown she had expected by now to be wearing, and dabbing at her eyes with the wet ball that had been a

handkerchief, so that her tears should not fall upon its loveliness.

"She's thinking, even now," Helena thought, "of that beastly Colonial who's waiting for her somewhere."

But at least it wasn't of the Colonial she spoke.

"If it weren't Sidcup I could have stood it," she said, "but Sidcup's awful. The people who live there are writing to the papers about it . . . only the editors won't publish the letters. They never do. And it isn't only that. There was a man in the tube the other night . . . one side of his face was all right. You didn't know till he turned round. . . ."

"Don't!" Helena said, "don't. Think of cool clean linen bandages, and flowers in vases and white-capped nurses."

Pamela said nothing, only watched Helena pour cold water into a hand basin and sprinkle eau-de-Cologne into it.

"Let me look at you!" she said.

Pamela raised her head — beautifully, as she did all things.

"I'm a sight," she said, "don't look at me."

But Helena did and decided that cold water (even with eau-de-Cologne in it) would only make a bad matter worse.

"I'll get you some warm," she said, and went into the bathroom to do it. When she came back Pamela was standing in front of her glass, looking critically at her reflection, and Helena breathed a sigh of relief.

"I've made myself a fright," Pamela said.

"Never mind, you can wear a veil," Helena told her, pouring the hot water into the cold, "and the nurses won't mind. They're used, poor things, to seeing people with red eyes."

"You're being beastly, Lena."

"I don't mean to be. I thought I was only being sorry for the nurses. Come, bathe your eyes in this. And hurry . . ."

While Pamela brushed her hair and got into the blouse and skirt, Helena looked round for shoes. Those she pushed forward (the first she saw, for what did it matter?) Pamela rejected with scorn.

"I can't wear *those* . . . with *this!*" she said.

Even in a crisis Pamela could not be guilty of the mistake of wearing court shoes with a tailor-made. Helena hunted for lace-up walking shoes, looked anxiously at the clock and went out to ask someone to get a taxi.

When she returned Pamela had put on her hat and was hunting for a veil.

"Ready?" Helena said.

Pamela nodded. She sat down, keeping the veil (a blue one) in her hands, saying nothing. The scared look still lingered in her eyes: her mouth quivered. Every now and then she seemed to shiver.

Helena came to the glass and rearranged her own hat. She was feeling tired and her head ached. She did not want to talk; she could think of nothing save Ronnie lying twelve miles away in his white bed, a strange unfamiliar Ronnie who wore bandages and would never paint again. . . .

The sound of Melton's shrill whistling drifted in to them, and presently the sound of changing motor-gear and running of wheels.

"Ready?" asked Helena again.

Pamela got up and began to tie the blue veil over her hat. Helena looking at her saw the tears running down her freshly powdered face and the stormy heaving of her breast beneath the smartly-cut blue suit.

"Oh, don't, *don't*," she said, "you *must* be braver than that."

The door opened and Melton came in with a telegram which she handed to Pamela.

"The taxi is here, madam," she told Helena, who nodded, her mind on the buff envelope Pamela was shuddering away from.

"I can't, Lena. . . . You. Oh, Melton, *tie* this for me!"

Helena took the telegram and opened it, while Melton strove with the knot Pamela had twisted in the blue veil.

"That's too tight, Melton. It's pulling my hat out of shape. . . ."

With a white and rigid face Helena stood folding up Pamela's telegram. The shape of a hat! The grace of a blue veil! And this. . . . ! A queer world! You hated it.

"Don't bother any more," she said, "you won't . . . now . . . have to go"

"Not go?" said Pamela "Why not?"

"It doesn't matter any longer. Ronnie died at four this afternoon."

Pamela shrieked and flung herself, blue veil and all, face

downwards upon her bed. It seemed quite a long while before Helena said to Melton:

"Tell that boy no answer, will you? And send that taxi away."

Hesitant, the girl looked across at her mistress.

"You can't do anything," Helena said.

Melton went, and then, suddenly, the fretted string of Helena's patience snapped. What right had Pamela to lie there crying with hysterical relief because Fate had let her off — because Ronnie was dead? Fury seized her. She went over to Pamela and shook her savagely by the arm, hating her.

"For Heaven's sake," she said, "stop making that hideous noise. Stop it, I say, stop it!"

CHAPTER FIVE

1

PAMELA, of course, made a charming widow. She considered the costume picturesque, and certainly black set off to perfection her wonderful skin and hair. Whatever shock she had suffered from the suddenness of Ronnie's death had been definitely counteracted by the enormity of the relief which overtook her when she learnt that she was not to be tied for the rest of her life to a human wreck. (That, now, was how she thought of Ronnie, poor boy, though nobody else ever could.) Death here, for once, was very kind — kind to both of them. Pamela had not sufficient imagination ever to suffer deeply (Hilary had been right there, all along) and Ronnie had died (quite decently from sudden collapse) before he found her out. Now, he would never know what Hilary, at least, had always known. Or if he did it wouldn't matter. These things don't — when you are dead.

But *being dead* mattered — mattered horribly. If you were young. . . .

So Hilary wrote to Helena in a letter that it cut her to the soul to read — an elegy of youth and promise, passionately bitter. After that, nothing more at all for a week.

And Helena suffered — not only through but with him. Horrible days of recollection came to her, stabbed with thoughts of things done and said — things written in the closed book of Yesterday. Scraps of conversation, recollections of walks, things they had done and seen together; the stretched-out Sussex country; the sun startlingly red behind a dark plantation. And thoughts of Richmond. . . . Half-lights and silhouettes, clouds in a hurry and a tempestuous river running high. . . . And at the bottom of the hill traffic and noise again: the winding street and the Richmond tea-shops. She remembered the look of them as she had seen them first . . . uncurtained, making, one after the other, bright patches of

colour in a dusky thoroughfare. Life as she had seen it through those unshuttered windows seemed a thing of lanterns, cushions and the firelight . . . of happy couples who laughed and talked . . . and music. Walking there on the slope of the hill she had caught no hint at all of this time when, with so much else, this little town of tea-shops should be bundled away behind a heavy curtain she could not bear to lift.

And something nearer — something infinitely more intimate and tender — the memory (and so clear and vivid it might have been yesterday) of Hilary here in this room, holding her in his arms, and saying that death was a thing which happened to other people. To-day, in this war-ridden world, you simply could not bear to remember a thing like that. Death strode abroad so fast and furious, came so close, you shivered and held your breath. For what touched other people you knew now could touch you — and worse, far worse, could touch the people you loved. Jimmy, Arthur, Ronnie. . . . So close as all that had death come.

But here Helena would get up and drag Evey out into the streets to walk and talk — so that she should not think. Because Barbara was right: it simply didn't "do" to think of things like that. You had to grit your teeth and bear it. And you had to go on being grateful for Essex, and to go on believing that the war, soon, was coming to an end.

Not that in the summer of nineteen-fifteen it looked like doing anything of the sort. Those cheerful idiots with their bets must be feeling rather blue. They had played her false, as she might have known they would, for none of them knew anything — not even Mr. Bletchington, whose outrageous prophecies disfigured the hoardings and the sides of 'buses. Nothing that happened — out there in the war zone or here at home — seemed to make any difference at all. Dully, incredibly, it went on. You could not, these days, imagine the world without the war. You could not, even, imagine a time when it had not been. When someone said "Before the war" you stared at him (or at her: somehow it was usually feminine gender!) as at some strange prehistoric being who knew of things you could only guess at dimly. You wondered what Mr. Bletchington and the other men with papers to fill found, before the war, to write about.

War was a gamble, with good luck jostling the bad and none good enough or bad enough, so far, to make any difference either way. Warsaw had fallen at the beginning of August. In Gallipoli there had been a new landing at Suvla Bay and in the Gulf of Riga a Russian naval victory (so the papers said). And in England at the beginning of September there had been another Zeppelin raid on London, and concert tickets had "Full moon" printed at the bottom of them because of the prudent souls who never went out o' nights unless you had definite information of this sort to offer them. But Helena and Evey were not prudent souls and went out when they liked. Neither of them had time to worry about Zeppelin raids because at the beginning of September men were being hurried out of their camps into France and Salonika. The word "Zeppelin" did not frighten Helena: the word "draft" did.

But though (after that one week following Ronnie's death) Hilary wrote of many things, he had nothing to say about "drafts." He wrote (humorously) of the sketch he had made of a sergeant and (still humorously) of the ten shillings the sergeant had offered him in respect of it. (The sergeant, Helena gathered, was a "good sort" if you could overlook his bad puns on Hilary's surname and his own army rank.) Hilary wrote, too, of rain and route marches and of mud; of James Stephens's *Here are Ladies* and May Sinclair's *Divine Fire*, both of which books Helena had recently sent down to him. And presently, at the end of September, that he was coming home on his second leave.

2

Helena was happy enough with that one thought drowning all the rest, until the Thursday evening when Pamela looked in *en route* for the Savoy, and wondered amiably where Hilary was "going." Pamela was always amiable: it was a virtue even Hilary had granted her.

"Going?" asked Helena.

"I mean, does he think it'll be France or Salonika? It's one or the other just now, isn't it?"

Helena said nothing, because it was too terrific to have your half-drowned thoughts resuscitated with such painful thorough-

ness. It wasn't likely that she would find anything to say. But Evey did. She said sharply,

"Oh shut up, Pam. Why should he be going anywhere? He'd have said if he were. Besides, they can't send everyone."

Pamela said, "Oh well, it just occurred to me, you know," pulling on her gloves and preparing to depart. Her amiability was unimpaired, her delicate beauty gleamed like a pink rose from a tall black vase, and she carried it out into the uncertain September day and lighted up the street. Outside, people turned on the Embankment to look at her because she was lovely in her black clothes, and inside, in Hilary's blue and silver room, Evey swore mildly because she was stupid.

"I wish she'd marry one of the Colonials and that he'd haul her off to the backwoods somewhere!"

"Why?"

"Oh because it would make her really uncomfortable. You might be able to like her better that way. Floors and babies to wash might make her human. Babies especially. I'd like it to be a Colonial who insisted on a baby every year. Conception at the point of the sword, sort of thing. I'm becoming vulgar."

"You are," Helena said, but she laughed.

Which was what Evey wanted, so she thought her vulgarity had justified itself.

3

Helena went down the next evening to meet Hilary at Liverpool Street station, and one look at his face reassured her. Nothing sinister lurked behind this welcome sight of him. They might take their days and be happy in them.

At Charing Cross they picked up Evey and Estelle, because Helena had managed to get seats at the Duke of York's for the Manchester Players in *Hindle Wakes*, and Hilary had agreed that to make a party of it would be delightful. So four light hearts and a big box of chocolates went to the Duke of York's and sat down in the Upper Circle, because no one had "dressed."

All four of them were tremendously happy and excited, because they had forgotten the war and were conscious of noth-

ing save that Stanley Houghton had written a brilliant play, that they were seeing it together, and that Miss Horniman's Company was a histrionic delight that made you, as Evey said later, almost resigned to the idea of Manchester as a dwelling-place. And in the intervals they talked about the play and listened to the old lady in front telling her companion that it was "very clever and very dangerous, and, you could mark her words, it would do a lot of harm." They were really interested in her point of view and were almost sorry when the curtain went up again.

At the end of the play they bundled Evey and Estelle into a taxi, because Estelle liked taxis and deserted the beloved omnibus in their favour whenever she got the chance. She was fond of Hilary (among other reasons) because he always remembered things of this sort.

With the departure of the Sisters Charming, Helena and Hilary walked through to Soho, and after a hunt discovered a place where they could have supper, after which they rode home to Chelsea on the front seat of the inevitable (and last) 'bus, sitting close. . . .

Above, the harvest moon hung low in a cloudy wind-harried sky, looking like a copper plate somewhat battered at the edges — as if, thought Helena, it no more than all else had wholly escaped damage by the war.

And at home there was an ecstatic Mark Antony, and a letter for Helena in Cissie Ellingham's handwriting, bearing the London postmark.

4

Cissie wrote from the Hotel Russell, where, it appeared, she was staying with her mother. She had come to London because she wanted to see Walter, who was in an improvised hospital for officers in Bethnal Green. Cissie didn't know why Bethnal Green, and Helena didn't care. It was enough to know that Walter was one of the lucky ones: that he wasn't wounded but had merely managed to fall out of the line with fever as his regiment was marching up to go over the top. If you counted the measles for which he had arrived just in time at Havre, then Walter's luck had certainly been phenomenal.

Cissie wrote that she had seen him that morning. Helena gathered that Walter's condition, happily, had not alarmed her but that the condition of Bethnal Green had. She thought it a shame poor Walter should have been sent there, but Helena had no pity for Walter on this score. The nastiest bit of London, she considered, was better just now than France.

She read aloud to Hilary what Cissie had written.

. . . He particularly wants to see you, but they're awfully mean with their visiting hours. You'll have to go between three and half-past four. All that way, too. And I daresay they'll turn you out after half an hour, as they did mother and me — and you know how difficult it is to turn mother out when once she has got in. Still they did it. Walter, they say, gets a temperature if he talks too much. But it was mother who did the talking, so I think they might have let me stay. . . . Do be an angel, Lena, and go to-morrow afternoon, and I'll try to persuade mother to let me go alone (though of course she won't) and you can invite me home to tea. So if you meet us on the stairs remember she doesn't know anything about you: nobody in Rattenby does. Of course she may think things: but that doesn't matter. But do remember, dear, that you are supposed to be very busy helping some public man. (You can say Mr. Bletchington if you like: I should think that would make a good impression on mother.) Anyway, you're a patriotic person, doing war work. . . .

There was a good deal of it, but Hilary listened quite patiently to the end. He did not mind that Cissie's letters rambled, because they were kind and friendly. Besides, he was not likely to forget how grateful they had been, in those early days, to get them.

"Let's go to-morrow," he said.

"All right. And what happens if we meet Mrs. Ellingham on the stairs?"

Hilary considered. "Never heard of me, has she?"

"She hasn't heard of anyone, apparently, except the busy public man I'm 'helping'!" She laughed.

"Think I'd do for the 'busy public man'?"

She eyed his uniform and laughed again.

"I see," said Hilary, "not in these! Oh well, we'll chance it. I can be 'a friend'! And anyway, what does Mrs. Ellingham matter? Damn Mrs. Ellingham, if it comes to that!"

"Willingly!" Helena said, remembering ancient grudges.

Besides, she would have damned the whole world to-night, quite cheerfully, for the sight of Hilary sprawling there by the fire with a light in his eyes.

She went over to him, slipped down on the rug and leaned her head on his knee.

"Happy?" he said.

"*Happy!*"

"Isn't that the word?"

"There *are* no words. . . ."

5

They slept late next morning and the clock was striking nine when Helena slipped out of bed and looked at the day, which was doubtful. And while she was looking at it Hilary sat bolt upright in bed and looked at her.

"Good lord!" he said. "*That beastly office!* You'll be late."

Helena turned away from the doubtful day and shook her head.

"Oh, I manage better than that. There's going to be no office to-day — though it really isn't a bit 'beastly' you know."

"It is," Hilary said, "when it gets in the way."

Helena sighed, thinking that it did that so seldom. What it mostly did was to fill up a gap — a big one.

"I've turned Miss Helstone on," she explained. "A little work for once won't hurt her, and Mr. B. won't bother her. He's making a recruiting speech in Glasgow."

Breakfast was a leisurely and happy meal, for they had contrived, both of them, to staunch their wounds, and their courage and laughter had blunted the sword of the Terribly Familiar, so that at the moment it could not hurt them at all. They ate their porridge and bacon in high spirits, and Hilary blessed the name of Miss Helstone and that of the woman whose "day" it was, to whom they left the business of clearing away and

washing up, and went out to buy things. They climbed on a 'bus and went up to Liberty's because when you were vague like that and only wanted to "buy things" and not any special definite article, Liberty's was the best place. So they went there and found a great deal to admire, and Hilary bought Helena a piece of Chinese silk for a wrap, beautifully worked in blues and golds (which were Helena's colours) and Helena bought for herself a hand-made Dorothy bag of leather that smelt as good as it looked. For the studio Hilary bought a pewter vase that he liked the shape of, some gorgeously coloured cushions and a black-and-silver tuffit that no one would sit on but Mark Antony — who would spoil it. They took the handbag with them and the pewter vase, and, because the day was chilly, Hilary made Helena wear the Chinese silk — though that was less the reason, perhaps, than the excuse. And because he wanted to be able to look at his "tuffit" and cushions again before he went back to camp, the Liberty people promised to send them along that day without fail. Shop people were obliging to folk in uniform — even the uniform of a private. It was an item that Helena scored heavily to their credit as she walked across with Hilary to the Trocadero Grill Room for lunch.

Pamela was having lunch there, too, they found, with a young flight officer, and she tried not to see them because it was always so awkward speaking to a private when you were with an officer. But Helena looked beautiful in her new wrap: she counteracted the painful shoddiness of Hilary's khaki attire and was thoroughly worth the smile and raised hand of recognition Pamela finally decided to bestow on them.

"Such a queer person, the young man in uniform," she explained to the youth who was paying for her lunch. "Yes, an artist. A friend of poor Ronnie's, of course. (By the way, you must come along and see Ronnie's pictures before I give up the house. We must arrange an evening.) Oh no, Hilary Sargent's things aren't a bit like his. Ronnie would have it they were miles better. They really *are* rather distinctive. Don't you know them? Landscapes — misty things, wet nights, fogs, moonlight and clouds. *Horribly* creepy. And he does portraits. Ronnie used to say if he'd only stick to portraits he'd make a fortune. But he won't. Says fashionable women bore him. He's got the queerest ideas about most

things. Talks like a socialist, though he can't be, because he's quite comfortably off and socialists never are, are they? He objects to taking a commission. I don't know why. Something I can't understand about the caste of the Army. I suppose he looks as well as anybody in the ranker's uniform. But I really *don't* admire the cut, do you?"

"Oh, rather not," said the youth who was paying for her lunch. "Awfully pretty girl, though. His wife?"

"Well . . . not exactly. There's a husband in the way who won't budge. I don't know much about it. Ronnie knew, and would always have it they were justified. After all, I suppose, people's morals are their own affair, aren't they?"

"What? Oh, rather. I say, what wine will you have?"

Hilary and Helena meanwhile had found a corner table. Hilary ordered *hors d'œuvres* and Helena said she was quite sure Pamela was apologising for them to her young officer friend.

"Not for you," Hilary said. "You look lovely. It's me she's apologising for — or, rather, His Majesty's uniform."

"You can't apologise for the contractor who's responsible for it," Helena said, "anyway. He's past praying for. But why don't you buy one of your own?"

"Want me to?"

"Not particularly. Only — wouldn't *you* feel better in it?"

"Suppose I should. But . . . well, I don't want to wear anything . . . different, somehow."

"Then don't. I don't care *what* you wear."

She looked at him over the *hors d'œuvres*, and thought that nothing — not this vile colour and the viler cut of his uniform — could coarsen him or strip him of the grace and charm that was a part of him. His face was still pale, tanned scarcely at all by the summer sun (what there had been of it). His hair was shorter, but even the scissors had not been able to wrestle very successfully with the wavy thicknesses of it, and his head was very far from being the cropped close "soldier's" head it ought perhaps to have been. But to-day the contrast which the intractable wave of Hilary's hair presented with the perfect straightness of his black eyelashes struck Helena afresh as she looked at him. She looked at him so long, in fact, that she forgot her lunch and the waiter thought (as they

always do) that she had finished and took her plate away. And though Hilary laughed at her face of surprised dismay he called the man back, because it is, after all, rather a tragedy to have your *hors d'œuvres* removed before you have finished with them. The waiter seemed to think they were rather mad. He was an Englishman and wore that air of tired contempt for the hungry that is the dominant characteristic of the English waiter. But Hilary and Helena thought a waiter's a dull enough life and made him very kindly welcome to any little enlivenment he might be able to get out of them.

They were a long time over their lunch — chiefly because a private's uniform these days was misleading, and the waiter being uncertain of his tip spent rather too much time trying to square Hilary's manner with his uniform. But his leisureliness disturbed neither Hilary nor Helena. They liked sitting there eating their nice food and listening to the music, and looking at each other and talking. They were in no hurry at all. It was still barely two o'clock and they had not to be at the hospital until three. It wouldn't matter either if they were later. All the better, perhaps, because they might then escape Mrs. Ellingham.

6

An eastward bound 'bus took them down to Cambridge Heath station with the Saturday afternoon crowd, and as they sat on the back seat Hilary was able to take out his pewter vase and look at it again. It was one way of avoiding the sight of Bethnal Green, which (without knowing anything of the "Brady Street area") they resented *en bloc*. Hilary thought the Zeppelins here might do a very good work if you could only manage somehow to clear out the people while they did it. Helena agreed, and was reminded of the girl in the "Little Restaurant of the Kindly Heart" who had wanted to burn London down.

"Down here it seems almost criminal to prevent her," Hilary said, twisting his lovely vase in his hands. He liked it better out of doors (even here in the Bethnal Green Road) than he had done in the Regent Street shop, and he pointed out to Helena the one special curve which made the shape so beautiful.

It was a long while before he could persuade himself to wrap it up again and go back to the task of trying not to look at the sordid squalor of the No. 6 'bus route.

It was twenty minutes past three when they walked up the stairs of the improvised hospital with their arms full of fruit and roses, and were just in time to meet Mrs. Ellingham coming down.

7

"Really, my dear," she said to Helena, "this is a *very* great pleasure."

Helena simulated an admirable surprise (she had grown clever at this sort of thing) and introduced Hilary. Mary Ellingham looked at him standing there with his arms full of flowers and his beautiful pewter vase (very badly wrapped up); and those keen eyes of hers seemed to find, as others had done before her, that his pale distinguished face counteracted the very worst you could say of his shoddy uniform. At any rate, she smiled and was immediately amiable to its owner.

"Isn't this a *dreadful* part of the world, Mr. Sargent? Of course, I know the poor must live *somewhere*, but, really, someone ought to do something. . . . What a *lovely* wrap, Helena dear, and how *well* you are looking! Your hard work must be *suiting* you."

Helena said it was.

"And when are you coming back to your *delightful* house? Really, it's a *shame* to have it muffled up in *canvas* and *holland*. I do *hope* your old housekeeper and her husband look *after* things. I'm sure we shall all be *very* glad to see you again when this *dreadful* war is over. Not, of course, that we saw anything at *all* of Mr. Courtney before he went to France (so *fine* of him, my dear, I thought!). After his return from *America* he was quite a *recluse*. Oh yes, I *assure* you. He must have missed you terribly. *Do* let us hope the Germans will soon be *beaten*, so that we can all settle *down* again in the old way. Of course we're *going* to win, aren't we, Mr. Sargent?"

"Sure to," Hilary said, "England always does, you know."

"Of *course*. I'm not *really* alarmed, only it's so very sad for everybody. For you *young* people *especially*. I'm sure I really *dread* Walter's getting well enough to go out again.

Cissie worries herself to a *shadow* about him, the poor child! And Walter was getting on so *well* in the Bank: I'm sure his father has been most *kind*."

"How is Walter?" Helena managed to get in here.

"Oh, improving *wonderfully*. His constitution, the doctors say, is *extraordinary*. Really, you know, one almost wishes it were not. Things, I hear, are *impending* in France: I *hope* they won't find him well enough to go out again *yet* awhile. I'm sure you understand what I *mean*, Mr. Sargent."

Mr. Sargent said that he did and that it was very natural, or something to that effect. He found Mrs. Ellingham's emphatic amiability a trifle overpowering.

"I think the world is *terribly* sad," she went on, "Really, the war has complicated things *dreadfully* . . . especially for mothers with *daughters*, Mr. Sargent. I have *seven*, you know. A family of seven girls is *really* a great *tragedy*, especially now that so *few* women will be able to get married, and I think *all* young people are *better* married. I'm old-fashioned enough to believe in *youthful* marriages, though these *war* weddings are really *very* imprudent, don't you think, Mr. Sargent?"

Hilary did. He was in the middle of trying to say so when a white-clad nurse hurried up to them and said they must not stand talking on the staircase.

"Who is it that you want to see?" she asked. "You are making a great deal of noise."

They said they were sorry and that they had come to see Lieutenant Morden who was in Alexandra Ward.

"But Lieutenant Morden has one visitor with him now. Only one of you can go up until she comes down."

"Then *you* go, Helena dear," Mrs. Ellingham said. "*I've* just come *down*, nurse. Perhaps you'll come and talk to me in the *hall*, Mr. Sargent, until Cissie joins us."

So Helena followed the white-clad nurse up the staircase and along a passage, and Hilary went down into the hall with Mrs. Ellingham, who asked him when he thought the war was going to end and if he believed these rumours about Russia. Of course people *did* say such *dreadful* things about the Tsar before the *war*, but after all he *was* our *ally* and you couldn't *really* believe, *could* you, that he secretly favoured the *Ger-*
mans?

Hilary said he could believe anything about the Tsar and wished Cissie would hurry up and come down.

8

Walter, always a pretty boy, looked prettier than ever this afternoon, because there was a flush on his cheekbones and his eyes were more than usually bright.

"You *do* look nice, all of you," Helena said, glancing from him to the rest of the little Ward. She hadn't expected it to look like this. Walter laughed.

"We're all medicals," he said, "we don't shock anybody. We leave that to the surgicals."

"He's not to be excited, *please*," said the Staff Nurse, coming up just then. She had a kind pale face and didn't look as though she had varicose veins, though Olive would have sworn she must have. "No, I don't think the grapes will hurt him at all."

"Do smell my flowers, nurse," Walter begged. "And don't glare at them like that — you'll wither them."

Staff unbent and smiled inclusively upon the flowers, their recipient, and Helena who had brought them.

"This is my sister, nurse. Do say you think I'm like her."

Staff considered.

"You aren't . . . a scrap," she said, "but I can quite understand why you want me to say so. Now, *please*, not too much talking."

Staff moved away and Helena explained that Hilary was on leave and that he was downstairs, talking to Cissie's mother.

"We were reprov'd for talking on the stairs," she laughed.

"Staff's orders," said Walter. "I tell you. She's a terror."

Cissie plucked up sufficient courage presently to go downstairs and see Hilary, whom, for all her friendly letters, she had never yet met. Helena and Walter were left alone.

"Well?" they said simultaneously.

"All right!" said Walter. "How about you?"

"All right, too," said Helena.

"Happy?"

"Much too happy . . . to-day. There's no France and no Salonika."

"Shouldn't worry about the beastly places. They can't send everybody. Some chaps have been at home since the beginning. Chaps I mean, who joined up in the first few weeks."

"But when *is* it going to end, Wally! You've been out there. What do *you* think?"

"Going out there doesn't help you. You only know what happens on your own little bit of the line — not always that. Life in the trenches is frightfully dull."

"But you think — some day — there's going to be a smashing military victory?"

"For us?"

"Yes. I suppose I meant for us."

"I don't think there's going to be one for anybody. Military victories belong to the past. If we get one it will be because of other things . . . want of food . . . or a social revolution."

"In Germany? That doesn't look very likely."

"Nothing looks very likely," Walter said, "if it comes to that."

They were silent a minute, because Staff was looking at them.

"You haven't congratulated me yet," Walter said presently, "on getting the fever."

Helena apologised.

"I've done nothing else since Cissie's letter came last night. It was tremendously clever of you."

"Oh, I've a positive genius for that sort of thing. The measles at Havre were awfully jolly. They are, you know, if you postpone getting 'em till you've reached years of discretion."

Helena laughed.

"Any news from home?"

"Oh, nothing — save that Ted's joined the O. T. C."

She thought that out. The meaning of these military abbreviations did not yet jump to her mind. This particular one always sounded to her like the name of a sauce. "Nothing else?" she said, when she had managed to place Ted. "No news of Jerome?"

"None. Doesn't he write?"

"Why should he? There's nothing now for us to say to each other."

"The home people don't write either? They're still keeping it up?"

Helena nodded.

"There's Cissie, of course. The kind child!"

"Poor old girl!"

"Oh, don't be sorry for me! I don't mind — I mean that. I've just stopped caring. I did care, at first . . . hoped they'd understand — a little. They don't, and letters only make matters worse. It's better as it is. Years ago I remember mother telling father I had no natural feeling. He said he didn't know what she meant. Neither did I then. But I do now — and she was right. I do seem able to cut myself off — it looks heartless, and I'm not, really."

"Jerome too? Is he cut off?"

She shook her head, looking puzzled.

"Not quite — perhaps. There's some link there, still, which holds. Even my anger against him didn't break it — and that's gone."

"Can't think how you manage it. I should be furious."

"But you can't go on being angry all the time. Besides, I do — somehow — understand. Even when I *want* to be angry with him I can only be sorry. Not that he'd like that any better."

She paused, reflecting that, at its best, pity was an insolent virtue.

"After all," she said, "it isn't as though he has made any difference. Any *real* difference, I mean. We're horrible selfish moderns . . . who did at least *try* to be decent. We weren't very successful. Our generation isn't, somehow, at the old-fashioned virtues."

"Oh, *damn* the old-fashioned virtues," said Walter.

"We have!"

"Any regrets?"

"None."

They were suddenly silent, because Staff was crossing their line of vision again. When she had moved away Helena said irrelevantly:

"Why don't you and Cissie get married? Hasn't it occurred to you?"

"Oh, rather. The point is, Mrs. Ellingham doesn't believe in war weddings. She probably told you that on the stairs."

"She did. She told us quite a lot on the stairs, in fact, before they stopped her. What has she got against the war wedding?"

"Oh, she's afraid I'd get killed — or something — and leave Cissie saddled with a baby."

"How silly! Because you needn't."

"Of course not. I've no intention of getting killed. Or was it the baby you were thinking of?"

"Don't joke."

"About babies? Good Lord, no. They aren't any laughing matter, I suppose."

"About being killed, I meant."

"I wasn't joking about that. I'm not *going* to get killed."

"Don't . . . don't. It's what they all say. It's tempting Fate."

"Didn't know you believed in her."

"Neither did I. It's this beastly war. I hate it!"

"Doesn't everybody?"

"No. Some people are enjoying it. A lot of people are finding it useful. Women especially. It's giving them something to do. That's what most women wanted. Sooner or later it will give them the vote. I'd rather never have it."

"Is it war you hate, or just *this* war?"

"War — all war. But this most of all. Because I'm living in it; and I've got so little of this national sense . . . or at least if I have I've got it differently. I'm not possessive, I suppose, even about my native land. Our patriotic songs don't thrill me — at least, not with pride. Patriotism doesn't seem to produce poets — anyway, not the sort of patriotism that produces the songs."

"The National Anthem," said Walter. "Pretty rotten, I suppose, on the literary side."

"I'd rather have that than *Rule Britannia*," Helena said. "I know it was written in the eighteenth century. You'd think people wouldn't care about singing it now — that they'd

know better! That *awful* idea the old Jews had, of being the Chosen People!"

"I know — and yet there *is* something. I can't explain. Somehow, you can't even *think* of us not getting through this. England means something . . . somehow."

"Yes — association. The sort of thing everybody feels for the place they were born in and have lived in. I've got it for Yorkshire. Or used to have. But I wouldn't go back there now . . . London means so much more than Yorkshire ever did. Parochialism writ large! I don't object to that — if that's what you mean by patriotism. But scarcely anybody does."

"I think it may be what *I* mean. One's own country *ought* to mean something — ought to stand for something. One does want her to set an example . . . I can't explain. . . ."

"Don't try. Staff is simply glaring at us. It's so nice to see you, and so difficult to remember you mustn't talk. . . ."

They managed not to, however, until Hilary came up, when they began again. Only on all sorts of jolly things and not about the war at all. Soldiers, it seems, were not much interested in the war when they were on leave. Sometimes, they weren't interested in it at all — were only inexpressibly bored by it — and hoped you would let them forget all about it.

Presently Staff came up (it was a wonder she had not come before) and said she thought it was time Lieutenant Morden's visitors said good-bye.

"And it's time for your medicine," she told him.

They left him taking it.

"I wouldn't be a nurse for a million," Helena said, as she walked out into the (not exactly fresh) air of Bethnal Green. "Would you?"

"I might consider it," Hilary said, "if I were a woman and all my patients were as nice to look at as Walter."

"Oh, the Mordens are 'a good-looking lot.' Didn't you know that? Mrs. Ellingham said that many years ago, when we were all young and beautiful."

"Why doesn't she say sensible things like that now, I wonder?"

Helena laughed, climbing on to their 'bus.

It was bleak up there in the wind of the late sunless afternoon. September was going out in sullen bad temper, very disappointing to those who loved her and had expected better things of her.

"Pull that wrap of yours up tighter," Hilary said, fishing for pennies. "It's draughty up here." He pulled her round gently by the shoulder to see that she had obeyed, and she shivered a little as his fingers came against her throat, remembering that other'bleak day, quite early in the morning, when it had been Jerome who covered up her throat in this gentle fashion. Not often, these days, but always unexpectedly, trisful memories like this floated back to her. Now, as always, they brought her to silence.

"Tired?" Hilary asked her after a while.

"No — just thoughtful."

"Oh, don't think, Belovèd. It's a rotten habit."

She slid her hand into his, sat closer, while the 'bus ran on through the dingy streets, and presently they laughed together at the jolly sight of a man coming down Bishopsgate Street with a huge Teddy bear in his arms. He had evidently just bought it at Wisbey's on the corner of Houndsditch, and had preferred it without paper, as Hilary preferred his pewter vase.

When they reached home they found the Liberty people had been as good as their word, for their new cushions and the black and silver tuffit, thinly disguised in brown paper, sat awaiting them in the hall.

They dragged them upstairs after them and made the studio gay, after which they had tea and tried to decide where the pewter vase should go. That, however, was a long and serious business, scarcely settled before people began to arrive.

9

The news of Hilary's "leave" had gone abroad: so that there was quite a crowd in his honour. Barbara and Stephen came early, but with eyes and tongues for nothing save the pewter vase; Dagmar and Olive were early, too, with more details concerning varicose veins and the nurses who had them

(which for some reason or other, everybody seemed to find very funny — probably because the veins belonged to somebody else). And Evey came with Estelle and a letter from Phil, passages from which she read in a corner to Hilary (which was what she had brought it for). Nelly had deserted Woolwich for Chelsea, and had managed to bring with her the vital part of her they missed when she left it behind. Vivien came, too, not with Brian, but with a horrible tale of some Government office into which he had disappeared some three days ago and had never been heard of since, a thing, it seems, that people were constantly doing. Vivien, shrugging thin shoulders under her flame-coloured frock, thought there were probably some strings Brian could pull more effectively from the inside of a Government office, but seemed bored with string-pulling as a topic of conversation and went over to look at the new vase.

Towards the end of the evening Lieutenant Millington looked in, wearing a sling, and a thoughtful air. With him came Pamela, pathetically lovely in her fashionable mourning and with the soul she didn't possess looking as usual out of her beautiful eyes.

But it wasn't Pamela's eyes you thought of at all, this evening — but those of Lieutenant Millington. It would have been a jolly enough evening if you could have got the look in them out of your mind.

Helena and Hilary agreed that later, when everyone had gone. And that they couldn't.

"What's it mean?" Helena asked, "that he's seen abominable things?"

"Worse — that he can't forget them."

She shivered and was quiet.

"Did he mention the poems?"

"Wanted to know if I thought people were reading 'em. Are they, do you think?"

"Oh yes. Even people who don't read poetry as a rule."

"Egged on, I suppose, by the people who do and are quarrelling about him. But will they see what he *wants* them to see?"

"He asked you that?"

Hilary nodded.

"They won't, of course. People never see more than they want to see."

Helena said nothing to that. There was nothing to say because it was true. But presently:

"Has it been a nice day?" she asked.

"More than."

They sat there by their dwindling fire thinking of their "more than nice" day, and of the other coming apace—stretched out before them, white, inviolate, that they might write on it what they would.

The passion of life and youth stirred within them. The world was in travail, but here were two whole days of happiness. Like children, they stretched out their hands to them, forgetting the world's pain and that look in young Millington's eyes.

They were so young. They could not remember all the time.

CHAPTER SIX

1

AFTER Hilary's return to camp, life settled down again for Helena into that routine groove where dull things waited to be done, and she found she was glad enough to see them, because the more work you had to do the better you felt about things. With Mr. Bletchington still on his Recruiting Campaign, Helena was grateful for the first time in her life to those people who responded so thoroughly to the invitation they saw in tube, 'bus and train, to confide their troubles to the *Britisher*. She discovered how true it is that when you are reading about other people's woes you have very little time to remember your own.

At first, too, there were visits to be paid (with Evey) to Walter at Bethnal Green, and Cissie to be brought back to tea; but early in October these pleasant things came to an end, for Walter was discharged from hospital and went to convalesce at some ducal estate beyond Edinburgh. From the letters and postcards which arrived for Helena and Evey they gathered that he was having a good time and that the ducal estate ran to a park, a library, swimming baths and lochs — though the latter, to be sure, were rather lost upon Walter because he didn't fish. But Evey and Helena missed their visits to the Bethnal Green hospital and wished the ducal estate had been a little nearer Chelsea.

About this time, too, Hilary was sent further into Essex to embark on some new course of musketry drill. Helena and Evey found this depressing. Still, Essex was Essex: one had to remember that. But though the word "draft" had receded for the moment, it had not by any means lost anything of its terror, because with the Allied Forces landing at Salonika and moving away into Serbia, and the Greek Government declining

to come to Serbia's assistance, you felt that anything might happen and at any time.

Zeppelins and rumours of Zeppelins continued to liven things up in England. London had sustained another air raid and Helena and Evey had got stuck in the tube and did not reach home until nearly three in the morning. "Treating" had been abolished in the public-houses, and the barometer and the 'bus fares had risen simultaneously.

There was another thing, too, that happened in October, nineteen-fifteen, for it was the first fine day of the month that Stella's infant selected to make its entry into the world. Stephen travelled down into Sussex to see Stella and the new arrival and did not have too good a time. He had only been allowed to see Stella for ten minutes or so, had been shown the baby in a niggardly grudging fashion, very hurtful to his new fatherly impulses, and had not been asked to stay to lunch. So Stephen came back to London miserable, save when he remembered that his baby was a girl, because girls weren't expected to fight. Stephen seemed to find that a cheerful thought in a dismal world. Not so Barbara, however.

"No, poor little devil," she said, "she'll probably think, some day, that it's better to fight than to stop behind."

It was not a tactful remark. Barbara herself seemed to think so and added, "Even in war, men come off the best."

That was her unshaken conviction. Probably she would always believe that. She may even have been right. Anyway, just then Brian had come in and put an end to the conversation, because Brian, they felt, would not be over-interested in the subject of Stephen's baby nor in any subject germane to her. He, too, dealt in unshakable convictions. One was that Stephen was a hopeless idiot; the other, that Stella was a woman to be pitied. That explains why, when Barbara gave him the news, he said:

"Oh, congratulations, Gretton. I hope Stella's all right," with the air of one denying the right of a man to the common possession of unpopular ideals and the ordinary human relationships.

The baby, they learned later, but not until Brian had gone, was to be called Hilary Elizabeth. The "Hilary" it seems had been decided upon many months ago. That was the best of

these ambiguous names: Fate could not play you any dirty trick. You did not have to say "If it's a girl" or "If it's a boy."

"Why 'Elizabeth'?" Barbara wanted to know.

"Oh, there's always *someone* in a family called 'Elizabeth,'" Evey told her, "though I can't see why they should keep passing it on. But families are like that."

Evey, of course, knew everything there was to know about "families." Moreover, there were numerous "Elizabeths" in hers, so she spoke feelingly.

But Helena laughed.

"I'm fond of Elizabeth," she said, which was true. "And it makes the 'Hilary' human. Hilary was a saint or a pope or a bishop, wasn't he? — something that wants a human touch, anyhow."

But looking at Stephen's rueful face, she felt that Stephen had no love for "Elizabeth" and understood, somehow, that that was how the Brighton people had felt over "Hilary."

At Brighton, of course, all Stephen's friends were suspect.

Christmas came and the New Year, but no Hilary, because at the new camp Christmas "leave" had begun at the end of the first week in December, and Hilary's had been in the first "batch." His luck — as it usually was in this sort of thing — was "out."

Still, though you cannot have your cake and eat it, it was very difficult not to feel depressed, for life on a memory becomes, in time, too big a strain. And events didn't help you, either. Conscription loomed on the horizon: war and more war, and the hope of peace growing fainter. An unpromising New Year.

On a fine Saturday towards the end of January, when Evey had to work late at the office, Helena's new-born restlessness drove her out of doors down to Charing Cross, where she jumped on a 33 'bus and rode to Richmond.

The world that afternoon was bright and clear cut: there was an amber streak in the sky and the robins sang in their cheerful fashion on the winter trees. But in Richmond Park were memories. Ghosts walked there, sat forlornly on seats, dreary-eyed, as if lamenting what man had made of man. Helena had a sense of loneliness, realised that here at Richmond

she was an anomaly. She wondered why she had come, and striding on towards the Robin Hood Gate had a moment of passionate regret for the fireside and book she had left behind. She went out through the park gates into a road that harboured ugly cottages and across which flowed a constant and surprising stream of traffic. Crossing this, she went along the strip of meadow ground, over the wooden bridge and up through the dead-leaf drifts to Wimbledon Common. It was colder up there and against the amber streak in the sky the leafless woods of Coombe rose dark and brooding. More traffic darted across the roads that bisected the Common. The smell of the earth came up fresh and fragrant, and the poignant scent of the daphne shrub. Helena thought wistfully of spring. Of snowdrops and crocuses and the blue of scyllas; and of the little winds that come laughing over the land. . . .

And there, sitting on a backless seat, with an open magazine on her lap, was Lucy Elleker.

Helena kept on. Lucy, though she might not have the strength of mind to come to see her, nor to write to her (because doubtless John had forbidden it) yet would not either have the strength of mind to "cut" her when they met face to face. She looked up presently in Helena's direction, recognised her and shut up her magazine suddenly as if she were nervous.

"Hallo!" said Helena, when she was near enough.

"Hullo!" said Lucy.

Helena sat down at her side.

"This is a visit to 'The Laurels,' isn't it?" she asked.

Lucy said yes. She had been there just a week.

"Ill?"

"No. The air raids have rather upset me. I've been ordered a rest!"

That was nothing new. Lucy was constantly being ordered "rests." What was new was that she was taking one.

"You can't help being nervous if you have babies, you know. Oh, I suppose you don't. But you're so much farther in. You have them badly at Chelsea, don't you?"

"Oh . . . *air raids!*" said Helena, who had been getting confused.

Aid raids didn't interest her, and the conversation slackened

until Lucy remembered the magazine and showed Helena a full-page photograph of Gertrude and Adrian. Gertrude wore a studied maternal air and a very gauzy frock of which there was surprisingly little; and Adrian frowned as though he did not like being hugged in this public fashion, as he probably did not. He was an extraordinarily handsome boy, of whom any mother might well have been proud. Helena smiled at the paragraph that was printed below the photograph.

Mrs. Edgar Holmes, one of the youngest of our political hostesses, with her little son, Adrian. It is rumoured that her husband is giving up his parliamentary duties "for the duration" and is about to take up a commission in a very famous regiment.

"That true?" Helena asked, who never believed what she saw in the papers.

"I'm sure I don't know," said Lucy. "They never talk about things like that to me. I haven't heard anything. Do you think Gertrude has grown stouter?"

"Probably. What's to stop her?"

"It's a lovely frock, don't you think?"

"Very. Cleopatra might have worn it or Cæsar's wife. I'm not sure that Gertrude can."

"Why not?"

"There's too little of it. You can't steer any middle course in a frock like that. You've got to be one or the other. A Cleopatra or a Cæsar's wife — or perhaps Dante's Beatrice."

"You are funny, Lena. You haven't changed a scrap."

"People don't — much — do they?"

"I don't know. But you haven't."

"Did you *expect* to find me changed?"

"I did — rather."

"You seem disappointed. What did you think I'd look like?"

"Oh, I don't know. You see . . . you look happy."

"Why shouldn't I? I *am* happy."

She really was. Even with this awful war. Because of Essex . . . and the One Person who lived in a dull camp there.

"I *am* happy!" she repeated, more for her own benefit than

Lucy's perhaps. There was such a danger, nowadays, that she might forget it. Down there in the park she very nearly had.

Lucy was puzzled.

"But I thought women weren't when they . . . when they . . ."

"Kick over the traces?"

Helena laughed.

"Oh, but I haven't kicked very high, you see."

"High enough!" said Lucy, who knew that it wasn't how far or how high you kicked that mattered, but just that you kicked at all!

Lucy looked at her watch.

"I ought to be going," she said, "and I believe I'm getting cold."

The amber streak in the sky was fading. Coombe Woods were a dark smudge against it, cold and foreboding. Helena shivered a little, though she was not cold, and walked at Lucy's side down to the edge of the Common. They talked as they went of the children . . . of John, and Lucy's health, and that day they had all met in the tube; and of Walter and his "luck" and how kind he had been, and of what John thought of Helena. There was a lot of this, though Lucy put it as kindly as she could because she had always envied Helena and did not believe, as John asserted, that she must be suffering for her wickedness in a constant mood of remorse. She didn't look remorseful and she didn't look unhappy. Lucy was sentimental, but in some dim far-off fashion she understood that the thing which can make you really happy cannot be a bad thing. Badness had no permanent quality of happiness. She disapproved of what Helena had done: was reminded at least once a week why she and all other women must disapprove of it: but, none the less, there persisted this queer feeling of admiration that Helena could do it—and this queerer feeling, suspiciously like envy, because always, somehow, Helena seemed to get the thing she wanted . . . and was happy. Lucy, hunting for her happiness on low levels, had lost the trick of looking up, and the happiness that lives on the low levels gets sometimes soiled and spoiled. Anyway, from out a narrow existence of safety, chastity and good repute—which nothing on earth would really have induced her

to change — Lucy could not help glancing at this gloriously tall defiant sister of hers, with eyes shadowed with wistful envy.

Helena had *something* — somehow.

They parted at the corner of the road that led down to "The Laurels."

"I wonder," Lucy said, "if I could persuade John to let me come and see you. He's so dreadfully strict about this sort of thing and he's terribly angry with you still. He will have it, you know, 'Whom God hath joined. . . .'"

"But God had less to do with it than a white-haired old gentleman in a Registry Office," said Helena.

"Perhaps that's why, Lena. Of course, you've never *felt* married. It didn't mean anything. If you'd been properly married I daresay it would have been different."

"Not it," said Helena. "I made a mistake. Lots of people do and never find it out. I did. And it mattered so much I couldn't go on. That's modern and selfish. Our generation is. The pendulum has swung round. I don't know . . . some day it may swing back, but not for me. I shall go on being selfish, I expect, all the days of my life."

"I feel so *awfully* sorry for Jerome, Lena. We all liked him so much . . . and he's so fond of you."

"I'm sorry, too. He'd hate us, if he could hear."

"Of course, if he'd only divorce you so that you could be married to this Mr. Sargent, it would be all right. I believe John would soon come round then — though he *does* disapprove of divorce. There ought, somehow, to be special laws for people like you."

Helena laughed.

"The present ones altered rather severely would do, you know," she said. "We're not unreasonable. Never mind. Come and see me. Any Saturday or Sunday afternoon."

"I'd love to."

"Then do. What about next Saturday?"

"Of course, I must ask John."

"Oh damn John," Helena said.

They kissed and parted.

Helena strode down the hill, meaning to go straight to

the station, but half-way through the High Street she was seized by a violent hunger and went into a Lyons's and devoured a scone and butter and some china tea. Cakes, at the beginning of nineteen-sixteen, were already showing signs of their ultimate demise. Helena avoided them.

She got on the District at Wimbledon station and rode to South Kensington, from which ten minutes' sharp walking landed her home.

She found Evey sprawling on the blue divan reading an article by Pamela in the current *Looking-Glass* on "Things to Avoid if you are in Uniform." An amazing article, this, inspired, as Helena knew, by the mental anguish induced in Pamela by the sight of the silk stockings and high heels Rosamund thought fit to wear with hers.

"There's a letter for you," Evey said.

But Helena had already seen it. Hilary's sprawling hand had shouted to her as she stood in the doorway. She took it down, read it and passed it over to Evey.

"Read that," she said.

Six lines only — and in shorthand, which Hilary never used save in a desperate hurry. His outlines were untidy but readable. Transcribed, this is what Evey made of them:

Dear. Have leave from six to-morrow (Saturday). Hope to catch the '55. Can you be at Liverpool Street at nine? We'll eat something at Le Diner Français.

Hilary.

"Well?" said Helena.

"You think it means . . . draft?"

"Yes. Don't you?"

"I'm afraid I do. Want me to clear out?"

"No, I don't think I do . . . somehow."

"Try to be sure. . . ."

"I am sure. I want you to stop."

So Evey stayed, and later not only she and Helena, but the whole crowd, when it arrived, went down to Liverpool Street and presently took Le Diner Français by storm.

They were right, of course. This unexpected leave *did* mean "draft." Hilary was going to France in four days' time.

In a way, he was glad, or at least relieved. He was tired of drills and camp, and anyway, it was not for these things he had "joined up." But even that did not make it easier for him or for Helena during those three days of leave. They knew them for what they were — three days of reprieve. Not all the heroism of the world has the battlefield for background: nothing and no one was ever more truly heroic than these two pretending not to feel, not to suffer, concerned only just to hearten each other — a desperate game that it nearly broke Evey's heart to watch.

But they were grateful for Evey during those three days. Because Evey helped — putting forth every ounce of determination and effort in the cause of these two she loved. They understood, too, that Evey saw the position — knew where they stood. (So few people got anything like as far as that. No wonder they were grateful!) Evey glimpsed the vivid reality of that sense of a common brotherhood that sent Hilary into this thing he hated and distrusted: and understood that if Helena could not bear to think of him as a "passionate, destroying beast," neither could she attempt to keep him back, because she loved him and believed in the complete freedom of the individual. That, briefly, was their code of love and even now the worst that could happen to them was that one or the other should transgress it. No two lovers ever had less of the sense of possession in their mutual passion than these two people Evey loved; ever more deliberately kept it out. No "thou shalt not" was ever breathed between them! no mailed fist of the imposed will lurked beneath the velvet glove of affection. They had learnt — most difficult lesson of all — to grant each other sincerity and to respect it.

Even now, over this question of the war (or over this question of the humanity that sent Hilary into it) though the paths had deviated more than ever before, they had not deviated so widely that they had lost sight of each other, or could not meet at the cross roads.

But Evey (wise person!) saw more than that. She saw that so long as Hilary lived he would think. He was essentially a thinking being, who could no more help thinking than he could help breathing. He had thought down there in camp — about Army “discipline” and routine and moral effects. He would go thinking into battle (as Masefield’s Saul Kane went thinking into the prize ring); would be reduced to despair by the things he saw, the things he had to do. No typical soldier, Hilary. He not only hated soldiering: he would not be able to forget that he hated it; that violence was abhorrent to him; that the things he loved were peace and beauty and colour and poetry; the look of a sunset, of moonlight on a sandy shore, the scent of the earth after rain. . . .

He would have “moods”—moods of bitter hatred of things — of himself. He who loved life and would not have taken the life of the meanest thing, would bring death to many. . . .

And for reasons his intellect could not accept. Here again was heroism, if you liked — here in this Unhappy Warrior who had no romantic illusions and none of Barbara’s beliefs to sustain him, but who with calm face walked the shambles because others walked them — because if there was suffering and pain to be borne he, too, must shoulder his share! Not else could he bear to live.

He would fight in agony, misery and disgust, and Evey honoured him, because he knew these things and yet went on.

Helena, too. Even while she suffered and realised nothing of anything save that she would give her life to save him from . . . that.

3

Hilary returned to camp on the Monday, and on the Wednesday Helena went to Victoria in a cold mist and saw him march by to entrain, encumbered horribly by the trappings of war, but smiling, because she stood there showing him a brave face — and he had not known she would be there at all.

But one pays heavily for this sort of thing, and Helena went home and cried terribly on Evey’s shoulder. Later she went to the office and suffered the dictation of Mr. Bletching-

ton's page eight article, which was all about the bestiality of the Germans and why we must hate them for ever and ever. . . .

Later still, she told Evey she could have borne that scene at Victoria better if they had not sung *Tipperary*. To sing *Tipperary* whilst you swept out on to the plains of Death! That was not the way to think of it, but, obstinately, Helena could think of it in no other way. And one thing was certain. She would hate *Tipperary* as long as she lived.

4

Untouched by Walter's "luck," unstopped of measles and fevers, Hilary got out to France in time, as Helena did not dare to let herself think, for the Verdun battle which began at the end of February. But letters headed "Somewhere in France"! What did *they* tell you!

Yet, after the passing of those first few weeks, insensibly things began to settle down again, and Helena with them. For it is remarkable to what degree you can school yourself to go on with life where, for one frozen moment, you have laid it down. So many things to do, and all so ridiculously necessary: meals to be prepared and eaten: 'buses to catch, letters to write, books to fetch and return to Mudie's; books, even, to read, because reading was the one supreme way of forgetting the things it didn't help you to remember. For Helena, too, there was always the *Britisher*, a sufficiently absorbing occupation. Everlastingly, that had to be read and marked: letters sent to its editor from out the pit had to be read and answered, or read and passed on. Articles had to be taken down in shorthand and transcribed furiously, with the printer's devil at one's elbow; and each press morning there was a minor revolution to be dealt with when the things that Mr. Bletchington had "left to the last" could suddenly wait no longer, but rose up and attacked *en masse*.

There was humour, too, in the *Britisher* office, of a sort. Things went on being funny, even though your heart ached. Never even for a moment would life leave you alone.

"Just make certain who wrote that, will you, my dear?" Mr. Bletchington said one morning, handing Helena a sheet of paper with something typed upon it. The extract began:

*Breathes there the man with soul so dead
Who never to himself hath said. . . .*

"Scott," said Helena.

"You'd better make certain. Sure it isn't Mrs. Hemans? Borrow Vane's *Dictionary of Quotations*."

So Helena went out, borrowed the book and wrote beneath the verse: "Scott. *Lay of the Last Minstrel*. Canto vi. Stanza I."

"Ah, Scott, was it?" Mr. Bletchington said, looking at her in a reproving fashion over the rim of his glasses; but he quoted him very aptly in his article that week which dealt with "pro-Germans" and "slackers." The Deity, it seems, was thought to be in need of a rest. . . . "Pro-Germans" and "slackers" of course were not entitled to one.

Few people quoted poetry as prettily as Alexander Bletchington, or knew as little about it. Not that that is necessary. A really reliable *Dictionary of Quotations* saves a deal of learning.

The days that were amusing, however, did not crowd out the days that were not; the days when Helena could have choked Mr. Bletchington with his own articles, when her head ached and things got on her nerves and she went down to the National Gallery at midday instead of meeting Evey like a reasonable being and eating a sensible lunch. What she looked at most when she went there was Rossetti's "Well-Beloved" that Hilary had first sent her to see. There was something infinitely soothing in the sight of that beautiful central head and in those others that surrounded it; something that made you forget how ugly the world had become. They were so lovely, all those girls: you could not imagine them smothering the bright beauty of their hair under a munitioneer's cap, nor (though these things were necessary in war time, perhaps) enfolding their limbs in khaki. Helena loved them because they stood aside from this world of war and bloodshed; untroubled, untouched by the anxiety that would not let her rest . . . that sent her here where it was quiet and where things that were beautiful caressed her spirit as the hand of spring breezes outside caressed her face — tenderly, as though they loved her.

On other days she went down to Westminster and sat in the Cathedral. Sometimes during this hour given over to the workers' lunch there was a service in progress and singing. But more often there was not, and Helena liked it better that way; wanting only to sit somewhere at the back and keep quiet, praying, like Matthew Arnold, to the Calm Soul of Things for the power neither "to strive nor cry." There were things here it quieted you somehow, to look at: the big cross swinging high in the gloom before the great altar, the face of Eric Gill's St. Veronica, that she thought beautiful, though she remembered that Hilary did not, and that a great many people agreed with him. It was queer to sit here amid this atmosphere of things she rejected, untouched by the faith that inspired them and rendered scarcely wistful by the sight of the supplicants who came and went, lighting their candles, telling their beads. One girl in particular there was. She had a pale thin face and dark burning eyes, and she made a slow round of the shrines, praying before each on her knees and standing before them when the prayer was done with an agony of supplication in her eyes, her hands crossed devoutly on her breast.

Helena thought it must be for her lover she prayed and was sorry for her because she knew how horrible it was to care — like that — for someone out there in the midst of battle. So many people praying for so many others — and for such a reason! Presently Helena went no more to the Cathedral. She did not know why, unless it was that the dark girl had begun to get on her nerves. . . .

Nothing, however, could do that on those days when Hilary's letters arrived. Astonishing letters they were, to Helena, telling her nothing save that he was well and safe (though that was everything, perhaps) but across which played a continuous flicker of delicate humour. But they made her happy, sent care dropping from her like Christian's bundle of sin, and she herself into the open to walk hopefully abroad. That was why on the Saturday following the Arctic storm with which March in nineteen-sixteen went out, Evey and Helena climbed on to a 'bus at Hammersmith and rode down through the turquoise afternoon to look at the park at Richmond. They descended from their 'bus at Sheen Lane and walked up to Sheen Common, past neat suburban houses and neat suburban roads along

which young women wheeled neat babies in neat perambulators, and in which lime trees (cut to look as neat as the babies) lifted shorn blunt branches to the bright blue of the day. A neat suburb, this, in which even nature must be made to toe the line.

Sheen Common, which should have burned yellow beneath this hot sun, was still brown and bare, because the gorse had seen what had happened last week to the almond trees and had grown disheartened. But Helena and Evey wended their way through the prickly bushes into the park and sat down on mackintoshes to smell the spring in the air and to feel the tug and charm of things that grow.

They had chosen a spot overlooking the Penn Ponds, beyond which, to right and left, were sloping hillsides across which and up and down the long shadows ran swiftly. A hawthorn tree near by (much braver than the gorse) was heavy with bud — pale green beads on a brown string: and out there on the slopes the dead bracken took on a purple hue, as though it were not bracken, nor dead. And once or twice a swallow darted past above their heads — a white-flecked arrow in the turquoise sky.

“Tiresome bird, the swallow,” Evey said, when her attention was called to him. “He doesn’t make a summer. So lazy of him!”

Helena spent the afternoon in writing to Hilary, and Evey read Sir Edward Cook’s *Life of Florence Nightingale*, for which Evey was profoundly grateful. No sentimentalised figure of the Lady of the Lamp did you encounter in Cook, but a gigantic, wonderful person who stormed the War Office, worked her friends to death and “had done with being amiable.” Evey had waited too long, she thought, before getting acquainted with her. The Lady of the Lamp faded quietly into blessed oblivion: Miss Nightingale was so much more than that and, besides, Evey had no use for the Victorian ideals.

Presently, when the letter was finished, Evey was persuaded temporarily to abandon Sir Edward Cook and Miss Nightingale in favour of tea. They had it in a rose-coloured room that looked on to the river, and were a very long while about it so that the sky was no longer blue when they left, but growing black, like the river. . . .

But they were happy because somehow or other they had escaped from all the things that stood between youth and the happiness that belongs to it. And then as their 'bus rose noisily over the railway bridge at Barnes, an ambulance train was crawling slowly beneath them through the station. . . .

Not for long were you permitted to forget. That, always, was the way of it.

5

Two days later, on the Monday, news came that Hilary was wounded. Not badly, in the left shoulder. They had operated, and he was going on satisfactorily. No need, said the nurse who wrote the letter, to worry. Pte. Sargent asked particularly that they should not.

But Helena cried bitterly into Hilary's blue cushions because it was not a "blighty" wound. . . .

6

Later, to please Helena, Hilary wrote of his Ether Adventure, in which, as he said, he had played a singularly uninspiring principal part.

17th April, 1916.

. . . *It's a queer business, this taking of ether. Someone holding your hand, someone else saying "Breathe hard . . . breathe hard," and (presently) "That's right . . . that's right." For a moment you feel proud that you are doing so well, and then that you simply can't stand any more of it. After that, an awful stabbing darkness, an unutterable pressure and — miles away — that nice voice, "Breathe hard!" . . . You come back hours afterwards trailing a crowd of happy memories . . . sobbing idiotically because you can't remember what they are. (Talk about "recollections of Immortality"!)* I wonder if it's like that to die? . . . Only I mustn't talk of dying or Deirdre will look like the Little Sister of the Sphinx which always means that she is unhappy. People are kind to you when you're coming back to earth dropping all your pretty memories. Even here in

a great hospital where there are so many of you, and they must get tired of you. They understand you feel sick and limp and have a pain in your left shoulder. They smile at you . . . find you pillows and other comfortable things. And you let them because nothing matters any more, only you're feebly glad they have given you a hot-water bottle. . . .

The letter broke off here as though the necessity of writing with no left arm to steady the paper got between the writer and what he wanted to say. It went on again beneath the next day's date.

18th April, 1916.

Much later you discover there's a Concert going on somewhere in the hospital (hospitals are the noisiest places!). I lie here now that I'm better trying to distinguish and classify them. On this night people are singing and clapping their hands. . . . It seems silly; you find you aren't interested in concerts. The sound of dinner-plates gets mixed up with the music and the singing: other people have things brought to them on a tray. You feel you aren't going to have any dinner — and that seems a tragedy. Presently you discover that you don't want any dinner — that you don't want anything save not to feel sick and not to have a pain in your left shoulder.

Later, a nurse appears and says, "Are you feeling better?" and "Good night" and "No, I'm afraid you can't have any tea — yet." This is another tragedy. The day nurses go off, and you are left thinking of tea out of a blue teapot in a blue and silver room with a black and yellow cat on the hearth-rug, and Someone adorably shy in a blue frock in a blue armchair, whom, presently, you persuade to take off her hat. Such a lot of blue, always, in the best places. . . .

When the night nurse comes she brings you a letter from the Someone (though she oughtn't to have done because it's against the rules. Nearly everything's against the rules, in hospital). You struggle up and read it because "Someone" is the Person Who Matters Most. They have sent it down the line . . . a letter about Spring at Richmond, and swal-

lows and Evey and Florence Nightingale and the hawthorn buds. Such a nice letter to get! You put it under your pillow and press your head down tightly upon it. You think it makes the headache better. The night nurse brings you some water. You drink it and wonder why it doesn't stop your feeling sick. Because it doesn't.

You go on feeling sick. You are convinced by this time that you will never feel anything else. You hate the sight of the enamel bowl someone has put at your side. You suddenly remember what they said: "Here's a bowl if you feel sick." An "If" as great as Shakespeare's. Ugh!

The night nurse goes away and leaves you. This is a tiny ward: there are no bad cases in it. The others are asleep: you can't help feeling it's heartless of them. Somebody might have the decency to wake up and ask how you're feeling. Eternity passes and morning comes and the day nurses and three pieces of bread-and-butter and a cup of tea. You are profoundly grateful: you feel as if you haven't had anything to eat for a century. Another (and rather shorter) eternity passes—and lunch time comes. An aching void inside inclines you to look favourably on the bovril Sister says you may have because you've only felt and not been sick. (That's clever of you, anyway, you feel.) Your afternoon is better. You say you are fond of cats: someone rakes up a very plain tabby, not a distinguished specimen of her kind, but sociable and understanding. You begin to tell her all about a cat named Mark Antony when Sister comes in and says, "Cats are not allowed in the ward, you know," and spoils the story. However, Sister (who is really human) says you may be permitted to stroke the plain tabby once a day. That comforts you during the third eternity that passes before it is dinner-time. You get on better this time and behave quite well over fish and custard. All the same you're a bit bored. You can't read because it tires you to sit up. You're tired of the hospital sounds and of the cough of the man in the corner. Someone comes and dresses your arm and brings you a letter, not from the Person Who Matters Most. All the same you try to be grateful. . . .

Another break here. And the next day's date.

19th April, 1916.

Night comes again. The lights are lowered. You lie there high and dry on the rocky coast of wakefulness, and a bitterer tide comes up. It floats you presently out to sleep . . . a troubled sea, somehow, on which you toss about like an eggshell craft on Niagara. The turning up of the lights sweeps you again to shore. Night-probationers rattle in with pails, clearing up before they go off duty. It is certainly morning. You feel it is only reasonable to suppose you have been asleep.

You get some breakfast this morning and somebody brings you the paper. You must be better because you hunt for the book reviews and are annoyed when the doctor comes in and interrupts your reading. . . .

To-day is Primrose Day. The French sky is blue . . . April air comes in at the window . . . Do you remember that place in Kent two years ago where the primroses grew all along the roadside — like a yellow sea? Beneden, didn't they call it? A nurse has just brought a big bowl of them in and put them down where I can see them. If someone comes near before the letters are collected for post, I'll beg one or two to slip in with this. . . .

But evidently no one did, because there were no primroses in the envelope, though Helena turned it inside out to make sure.

7

There began here, for Helena, a period of comparative peace. The relief of knowing that for the moment *he* was out of things was tremendous, though there were days when the fact that she was happy went some part of the way towards making her wretched. Because *he* was safe, she had ceased to care. Was that it? It was what young Millington had said of women in one of his bitter poems. Was it true of her? She did not think so . . . hoped that it was only (as Evey had said long ago) that one cannot go on "caring" (like that) all the time. One *had* to forget when one could. . . .

And that thought of Hilary in his white bed, tended by the cheery nurse who had written to Helena, was apt at times to crowd out all other thought whatsoever. It set free some part of oneself that had lived in a prison house—the part that is gay and merry and young and wants theatres and concerts and laughter.

So Helena and Evey made a list of the few “possible” plays that existed amid a welter of *revues* and “spy” plays and went to see them. And Estelle secured tickets for recitals and took Helena off to hear them.

Just occasionally they went down to the new sort of church in Pimlico and regretted the departed choir (that had sung Palestrina’s *Mass* to English literature) and, sometimes, were disappointed with the discourse, because a plague of eugenics and race-culture had descended upon the place, as tiresome as all other plagues and as hard to “dodge.” Twice within a few weeks Helena and Evey ran up against the same enthusiastic eugenist whom they found entertaining enough without in the least agreeing with what he said. Humanity as one big stud farm did not seem to appeal to either of them. Besides, as Evey said, “*Why* should one go on with this? It was a rotten thing to do—to bring more people into this!”

“Have you ever wanted any children?” she asked Helena suddenly.

“Once. Quite a big desire, too; but the war killed it. Though I think it was badly stunned before that. Hilary, you see, would have it there is no place in this world for illegitimate children—and ours would have been.”

“But he wouldn’t always have thought so. He changed about so many other things, why shouldn’t he have changed about that?”

“I don’t think he would have. There’s something so terrific, somehow, about history repeating itself. Hilary’s mother ran away with a lover, you know, when he was about six or seven. He remembers her . . . things about her . . . the way she used to speak, how she used to stand in front of his nursery fire, holding out a foot to the flames. . . . Things like that.

Queer, isn't it, such a baby should remember *attitudes* and tricks of speech. . . ."

"Yes," said Evey, "but then one *does* remember at six or seven, ever so clearly. It's things that come later that get smudged. What happened to Mrs. Sargent?"

"She killed herself rather than bring an illegitimate child into the world! It's wrong, somehow; it doesn't fit in with the rest you know of her. You can't imagine her crumpling up like that. She was such a vivid creature — so tremendously alive, like Hilary. You simply can't imagine them ever coming to an end. You know that portrait of her in the *London* . . . Mary Hilary she was. It's idiotic that she should have drowned herself in a pond — ignominious."

"Why did she do it, do you think?"

"I think she'd had a bad time generally. People did, in those days, if they offended Mrs. Grundy. Besides, there was Hilary. She knew her husband and his sister (there were only the two of them) would never forgive her, and that they'd get at her through the child, in the mean way adults have. Ralph Sargent wouldn't divorce her and she was never allowed to see the child. He'd have had her back if she'd have gone, but she wouldn't. They'd been wretched together. I suppose, in the end, she just got tired . . . felt she couldn't go on. *What* makes us do things, do you suppose? Chance? You remember that book of Conrad's?"

Evey did.

"But do you believe in 'chance'?" she asked.

"No, I don't think I do. It's much more likely there's a reason for things if we go deeply enough . . . get back far enough. Usually we don't, of course. It's much easier to say 'Oh, chance!' But isn't it perhaps just the urge of things — hundreds of things — that have gone before? Things done, said, suffered down the ages? 'Invisible tides!' That phrase of Swinburne's gives it you. You don't read Swinburne, do you? You should. Read the *Hymn to Proserpine*. You'll find that phrase there. Invisible tides! Everywhere. In our own lives, in the world of nations . . . that you can't pull against, that tug at you, this way and that . . . that make war and peace and tragedy and unhappiness . . . and *us*."

The talk ran on.

Easter came, the Easter flowers and the Easter rebellion in Ireland, and Helena found that she liked the world somewhat less than she had thought. And Stella and Hilary Elizabeth were in Chelsea again, and Sir Roger Casement in the Tower. Mr. Asquith went hurriedly to Belfast and Evey and Helena with more leisure to Burlington House, where hung two water-colours of Hilary's which Helena had begged him to let her send in.

Empire Day passed and the Conscription Bill, and things began to look black for Stephen. An important morning paper suddenly found itself without an Irish correspondent and hastily appointed another. No one knew what had happened to Denis O'Connell: nobody ever knew. He just dropped out.

Then, suddenly, Walter got well enough to go back to France, Lieutenant Millington followed him, and Helena heard that Hilary's shoulder was still giving trouble. It began to look as though they would send him home, after all. Joyful news, that, despite the thought of the poor shoulder.

The casualty lists grew longer. The *Labour Leader* published actual figures week by week that left you stunned and appalled. You wished someone would suppress the placards, for the war seemed, somehow, to have that effect upon you: you were always wishing vaguely that somebody would suppress something (or someone) somewhere.

In France things, as Mrs. Ellingham would say, were "impending." The battle of Verdun still raged: the heights of Vimy were gained and lost, and more men went out and the first "Derby" groups were called up.

And Conrad Howe came home on leave and in cantankerous mood. He thought London had deteriorated and disliked all women save Helena and Evey — so he said. Oxford Street appalled him and war widows, especially Pamela. He spent a lot of time at the studio, and wondered (audibly) what he had ever seen in Dagmar, and he made a little relief of Helena's profile, cast it himself, and hung it up for her. And when it was finished, he shook the dust of London from his feet and went back (as Evey put it) to the comparative peace of the trenches.

In England was summer again and a white and gold drift of hawthorn and laburnum; the cool voices of the wind in the trees; the first red roses, white butterflies, bluebells and the scent of syringa and lilac; fields, out Chessington way, of sorrel and ox-eye daisies, and skies of deep blue; massed trees and waving grasses. Purple nights with a silver moon and dawns of pearl and opal.

And Hilary's shoulder grew suddenly better, so that he did not come home, after all, but went instead up the line.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

AT the beginning of September, Hilary wrote that he would shortly be sending some things which he wanted Helena to lock away for him without opening. They would be addressed to her, but marked so that she might recognise them.

A week later they began to arrive. Helena locked them up with the air of a conspirator, and noticed that they bore the London postmark, so they had evidently been smuggled through by men coming on leave, and she wondered why. But whatever they were they would wait. Hilary said that of them — that they would wait until they might read them together, and his letters, as ever, went on being cheerful and whimsical and humorous. Helena even wondered if he had been able, at last, to grow a pachyderm; if he had managed, somehow, to shut up some part of himself so that, perhaps, he suffered less than she and Evey had believed he must.

The year crept on through a mild October to a Parliamentary upheaval in December; and rumours of peace overtures from Germany and a Peace Note from America; but nothing came of either. And December was wet and foggy and would have depressed you, anyhow.

Christmas brought more fog and the New Year a thrilling story out of Russia of a Muscovite monk, and war bread and very little sugar and the east wind and snow; and *The Aristocrat* at St. James's. Things seemed quiet on Hilary's part of the line, and Helena and Evey worked at their speed practice in the evening, to keep them from thinking that perhaps they might not be. Horrible things happened at sea, and the Revolution in Russia. And it snowed on and off all March and the Penn Ponds in Richmond Park were frozen. Skating on them, Evey caught a chill and had to go to bed.

It was at the end of March that Hilary wrote to say he might be coming home "any day" on leave. They were to look for him each morning in case he might be coming up the road. He and the primroses could come back to England together. . . .

But April arrived in the midst of winter and with more frost and snow, but by the new law it was "summer time," so Helena put on the clocks, and Evey got better and the Americans came into the war. But no Hilary to Chelsea.

From Yorkshire Cissie wrote that Walter had been wounded and was in hospital in Wales, and that Jerome's knee had given out and that he had had to come home. They saw him drive past in the mornings in a new *Courtney*, painted red, and if you met him on foot you saw that he limped.

Life went on pretty much this year as it had last. Outwardly, at least, the war did not seem to make very much difference to people, except that food was dear, and clothes, and the streets dark at nights, and there were gaps. . . . People wore an air, somehow, of having accepted the war as part of life. One can, in time, get used to anything. Only Helena couldn't. She could not accept . . . could not forget. Hilary was in France and her heart was there with him. This death in life! How much longer was it to go on?

The days slipped by and suddenly it was Primrose Day again, bringing with it poignant bitter-sweet memories, but no Hilary. And what was worse, no letters. And no mysterious flat packages. Nothing. A week passed and still nothing. . . . Just silence — and, at night, Helena's quiet sobbing in the dark. . . .

2

It was on the last day in April that Nelly came in *en route* for Woolwich and talked pleasantly about nothing for ten minutes and looked worried. Nelly was one of the people who had "guessed" long ago.

"Come down to the door with me," she said to Evey, as she pulled on her gloves.

Helena and Evey had only just finished tea. Helena picked up the tray and disappeared into the kitchen and Evey went down with Nelly.

"Look here," Nelly said at the door, "they've sent a letter of mine back. . . ."

"A letter . . . whose letter?"

"Mine, to Hilary. I came in to see if any of Lena's had come back. But you just can't ask her things like that. . . ."

"Nothing's come," said Evey. "We can't hear anything." Nelly looked relieved.

"Oh, it's probably all right then. He's got moved up the line somewhere, I expect . . . lost sight of. Some mistake, anyhow. These things happen. . . . Don't say anything to Lena, and, look here, can't you do something with her? Make her go out. . . . I can't bear to look at her."

"You can't do anything with Lena when she shuts herself up like that; though you rap at the door till your knuckles ache she won't let you in. She's like that: she always hides what she feels. . . . It was just the same when Hilary first went . . . and when he went back after leave. . . ."

"I know . . . that awful mask. Don't say anything about the letter. I expect it's all right, only one gets worried. . . ."

Evey went upstairs again.

Helena had finished her washing up and sat reading the *English Review*. Evey waited for her to speak, to ask what Nelly wanted. She said nothing, however. Just looked up and smiled.

"Nelly's been to the Coliseum to see Madame Navarro — Mary Anderson you know. Some charity performance. . . ."

"Oh yes. Was she good?"

"Better than the play, Nelly says."

In the presence of Helena's calm face these admirably told lies seemed suddenly unnecessary. Evey stopped telling them and presently she and Helena settled down to their speed practice.

The weeks passed — six of them came and went, empty of hand, and at the end of them Vivien dug Brian out of his Government Office to pull strings. He pulled them indefatigably and with no result. But he did more than pull strings. He waited hours at the War Office in a long queue . . . still with no result. More and more interviews and no news even then — save that the fighting round Arras had been

long and costly, which you could read for yourself if you were so minded in your morning paper.

3

Then, with that appalling suddenness with which the thing waited for always does come, Hilary was posted by the War Office as missing, and Helena's letters to Hilary came back in a batch.

All her life Evey always remembered how they found them, lying there on the doormat, and the way Helena took them up, turned them over in her hands with a little hopeless gesture, most infinitely tender and pathetic, and went on up the stairs without a word.

There in the blue studio she sat till long after midnight, saying nothing. It was her silence that Evey found terrifying: that made her chatter hopefully when hope seemed dead. Returned letters were not as definite as all that: the word "missing" left loopholes: "no news was good news" and all the rest of the useless clichés. They fell as flat as the unnecessary lies. Helena only sat there, her hand on Mark Antony's soft head, her face like a stone. You couldn't get near her. Evey was right: you might rap until your knuckles were sore. She would not let you in: doubtful, even, if she would hear. . . .

Evey got her to bed presently, brought her some hot milk and sat on the edge of the bed while she drank it.

"You look so tired. Do try to sleep. Don't you feel that you could?"

"I feel as if I shall never sleep again!"

4

June passed, leaving a record of fine weather, of battles and still more battles: of abdications and resignations in high places and of a daylight raid on London. She had brought sorrow to many, a Zeppelin to destruction on the Kentish coast and the first Americans to France.

Other things, too. Colour and perfume and the drifting

song of birds: clear skies and dusky woods: green paths and the roaming winds. White daisies, buttercups and sweetbriar and honeysuckle; the deep unfathomable summer night and a yellow lantern of a moon. . . .

But one was ungrateful, forgot these things and hoped July would be better.

July came. She brought another daylight raid and more battles, and more Americans to France and news of the Russians retreating. . . . Lime blossoms, too, came with her, and the scent of them and of new mown hay, and roses in the gardens, and a large moon, unbelievably calm and white. . . .

August came and summer's "overplus," the scent of the deep red roses and the colour that blinds.

For Helena the record of those months from June to September was merely a record of day succeeding day, each a little blanker than the other, with hope fighting every inch of the way and despair coming up redly like an angry dawn. She fought on along a darkening road, with panic pressing her forward and despair's spear at her heart.

Hilary lived — somewhere, somehow — because he simply could not be dead. You could not imagine him dead — he who had said that death was something which happened to other people, and had believed it. But sometimes the point of despair's sharp spear was unbearable and she turned to ask men in uniform who sat next to her in 'bus or tube how long one might dare to "hope" after that word "missing" had come through. They gave her, most of them, six months: two, greatly daring, gave her nine. For anything might have happened after a battle like that round Arras, they told her; and a lot of things, too, about prisoners they had known or had heard of.

So Helena struggled on through the shadows and Brian went on worrying the War Office, while August and September waned and passed. October came — season of bombs and gun-fire frightfulness.

Towards the end of the month Philip Roscoe came home with fever and suddenly there was considerably less of Evey, and Estelle came frequently to the studio of an evening and played to Helena on Hilary's black Blüthner grand.

On one such evening Helena took out the mysterious flat

packages Hilary had sent, cut the string of each and drew out its contents. A passion to know what Hilary had written was upon her, but when she had arranged the pages in order, she sat with them on her lap, unable to get beyond the words Hilary had written there at the head of the topmost: "The Diary of a Soldier in France, 1916." Her courage had ebbed down and out. She had to wait until it drifted back again. It took some time, but presently she managed to begin.

While Estelle played Helena read through this diary of a sensitive soul caught in the horrors and abominations of Armageddon. And when the music stopped she still read on.

"Finished reading?" Estelle asked from the piano.

"Yes."

"Then may I turn out the light? It's so much nicer to play in the dark!"

The light went out and suddenly the room was full of shadows. A blue flame danced along the walls and across the floor, and Helena went down into hell. . . .

At Hilary's piano Estelle played, beautifully, the *Sonata Appassionata*.

But Helena did not hear: it was dark in hell and someone had slammed a heavy door behind her. The *Sonata Appassionata* came to an end, but Estelle went on playing — scraps of Bach, Schubert and old airs from Purcell; and presently the heavy door opened again and Helena emerged.

"What a smell of burning paper!"

Estelle's voice rose, bell-like, over the soft melody of Purcell's *Knotting Song*.

Helena, on her knees before the fire, was feeding it with the pages she had been reading — that had dragged her down there into the pit.

He had not meant her to know . . . had written her those cheerful sunny letters while he suffered — *that*. He had written it down not that she should read it there in misery, but that later they might read it together when the thing was done and life began afresh. It was to be a testimony to the truth when people were forgetting and historians were lying again. *Neither we nor any child of ours, Deirdre, must forget what war really looks like without its trappings of romance. The*

only hope for the world is that we never allow people to forget. . . .

She, certainly, would never forget. No child of theirs would ever be born, and he who had suffered these things was dead. . . .

Down there in hell she had seen that fact written clearly in letters of blood that flamed across the dark. And the world was appallingly empty.

It was not good to be left behind. Barbara was right. Better the arena and death — than this vast emptiness. Even for the young, who ought scarcely to know that death is . . . or what it is.

5

From that day Helena, to Evey, in some subtle fashion was changed. Difficult to say how, precisely, save that hope had gone from her: though she never mentioned the word, you could see she believed that Hilary was dead. And some little piece of Helena had died, too, and had got itself buried in Hilary's grave. What was left of her, bruised and battered, struggled up to look out at a strange new empty world and shuddered eternally away from it. And a drama not of resignation but of rebellion was being played.

It was true, of course, as Barbara said, that one cannot live on rebellion; but it was also true that Helena could not teach her heart submission; could not submerge the individual into issues vastly greater and (probably) more important. Like any Wells heroine, she wanted passionately "her" things: was possessed of a fierce resentment against life and fate, a deep hatred of man-made statecraft and "civilisation." The futility of it all gripped her by the throat, choking her as Hilary's Diary had choked the fire that night. Life had no longer any meaning or sense, but had become a blind unreasoning force towards which humanity lifted impotent hands of supplication. . . .

Ursula, writing from her Yorkshire hills, with bitter griefs of her own to staunch, attempted, at least, to give it a meaning. It was not her fault she did not succeed: for there Helena held the trump card. With those sentences from the Diary written in blood upon her heart she smiled bitterly, a little cynically,

perhaps, at Ursula's sacrificial halo. *They died, these dear people we loved, as they would have wished. I do not think we ought, in our grief, to let ourselves forget that.*

Even Evey took something of that line.

"But, dear, he *chose* to go. He went freely. He wouldn't have been *out* of it . . . with so many others in. . . . It is true, so far, isn't it?"

But Helena wouldn't admit it. Evey and Ursula didn't know — hadn't read — that, the thing that had choked the fire. And sometimes she wished she had not read it either, because, somehow, "that" was a thing you couldn't fight against. Always it twisted the weapon from your hand, turned it against you, and wrenched open your wound.

6

Stephen might have helped her here, if he had been available, but back in September Stephen had carried his ideals into prison, where you felt they would be even more uncomfortable than they had been outside in the world. Stella, who wanted to know for certain whether Stephen and his ideals were really within, had waited at the prison gates in a downpour for a couple of hours, because warders were not there to answer questions and objected to doing so, anyway. After which she and Hilary Elizabeth caught the next train to Brighton, doomed to their relatives' pity and hospitality but keeping bright faces; Hilary Elizabeth because her face was always bright, and Stella because Stephen had enjoined it. Stella believed in Stephen without understanding him. She knew he could not do anything mean or paltry: by no means clever or brilliant, she had nevertheless learned the lesson some of her cleverer brothers and sisters had yet to learn — the granting of sincerity and nobility of purpose to those we think misguided.

It was in January, when the snowdrops and scyllas were showing and the world, all black and white, was like an extended etching, that Helena dropped quietly out of the fight. The first sign came when she sent in her resignation to Mr. Bletchington and announced the fact quite quietly to Evey the next morning at breakfast.

"But why?" Evey asked.

"Because I can't go on."

"Helping him, you mean?"

Helena nodded.

"It's just got to stop . . . I can't go on. I'm leaving on Friday."

"Didn't he try to keep you?"

"He offered me a month's holiday . . . told me to come and see him at the end of it!" She laughed. "As though a month would make any difference! Or a thousand months!"

Evey was worried. While Helena worked things were not so hopeless. Work kept you sane. Very pale and thin, Helena looked as though she wanted a holiday, but Evey, hardening her heart, was convinced that was the very thing she must not have. She simply must not be allowed to be idle, must not be allowed to think. But for all that, Evey was powerless. Helena gave no indication of finding other work, though she reiterated her determination not to return to Mr. Bletchington. Evey suggested Yorkshire, thinking of Ursula, forgetting Jerome. Helena must have forgotten him, too, for a look of utter wistfulness crept into her eyes. Then she remembered and shook her head.

Sometimes Evey was worried not only about Helena, but about the future. That was a thing Helena would not discuss. She wanted just to stay where she was . . . let things drift.

"But, Lena, we can't always. When things are settled . . . we've got to decide something."

She meant (but could not say) that soon Hilary would be presumed dead and John Wyatt, who was Hilary's executor, would be granted probate, and his estate wound up. Helena and she couldn't go on living there always, even if, as Evey supposed, Hilary had left his inheritance to Helena, the thing would be unwise. But things of that sort did not interest Helena any longer. What did it matter where one lived or what one did? The only thing that mattered was — how long before one began to forget, before one ceased to suffer, like this?

It seemed to Evey that in those first three weeks of January,

nineteen-eighteen, Helena floated rapidly down stream, borne along by Heaven alone knew what invisible tides of grief and apathy. Nothing happened to mark one day from another. They had, all of them, a hideous sinister sameness, so that you hated and distrusted them. For Helena there were a lot of days to come, because she was young and strong and was not going to die: one did not die by wishing. The future was there, unknown and unknowable, lying deeply in shadow and Helena was too tired to think or worry about it. The day was enough. In it, let us eat, drink and not expect to be merry. For merriment was dead, like "the battalions that were youth."

"What do you do all day?" Evey asked her once, coming in from the office and finding her there by the fire with idle hands resting listlessly in her lap.

"Walk," Helena said.

"But where? You can't walk all the day."

"I can. It makes you tired if you walk long enough. I like to be tired because then things don't matter. Nothing matters. And sometimes you can sleep."

Helena did not, much, these days. Evey knew that.

"But where do you go?"

"Oh, anywhere. It doesn't matter where. Richmond, Kew . . . Epsom . . . Chessington . . . Jordan's. Yesterday it was some place called Edmonton. . . ."

"Good Lord," said Evey. "Why?"

"No reason. A 'bus was going there. I got on it. The man next to me said it was the ugliest 'bus route in London. I think he was right."

"Where else do you go?"

"Sometimes to the British Museum."

"You can't. It's shut."

"The Reading Room isn't."

"But you haven't got a Reader's ticket."

"I say I have. They believe me. At least they did until yesterday. . . . That's why I went to Edmonton."

Then one wretched day Phil came across her at Victoria, watching a leave train come in.

"This can't go on," Evey wailed to Phil when he told her. "Do think of something."

But Phil couldn't. And the worst of it was he was going to France again at the end of the month.

"I'd rather she'd taken it like Pamela," Evey wailed on. "She felt nothing. Nothing at all."

"Anything's better than that she should be like Pamela," Phil said with decision. He detested Pamela.

"But it isn't. At least Pamela doesn't suffer. And Lena does. The old Lena we loved is dead. Dead and buried . . . in Hilary's grave, wherever it is. The new one we can't even get at. She doesn't care about us any more at all."

7

The crisis came, however, towards the end of the month, on a Monday evening. Helena was out when Phil and Evey came in to tea, and they had their meal without her. Presently, in the way anxious people have, Phil went down to the door to look for her, as though that could hurry her up. He was still there when the first indications of the raid came, and Evey put on her own hat and coat, seized Philip's and tore down after him.

"We've got to go and look for her," Evey said.

"But where?" the distracted Phil wanted to know.

"We'll try Victoria first. Come on."

Not too easily they reached Victoria — a strange unfamiliar place with only a stray porter or two and no trains. Certainly no Helena.

They made for the street, and there the specials met them, turning them back. There was a hideous noise going on outside: the streets were deserted, save for an empty 'bus or tram that rushed past like the wind made visible.

"Dangerous to go out, sir," said a special to Phil. "Where do you want to get to?"

Phil didn't know. How explain that they were looking for someone who, for all they knew, had chosen to take her walk on the other side of London?

"Damn!" said Evey. "We can't stay here. Come on, Phil. Ask him if the tube's running. . . ."

But she asked him herself before Phil had a chance.

The special said it was.

They burrowed again, and got back with some difficulty to South Kensington station. No 'buses were running, but Evey would not wait. Hand in hand they ran, like demented creatures, through the deserted Chelsea streets, past people sheltering in porches and specials who shouted warnings. Reaching home Evey dashed upstairs, flung open the door and switched on the light. No Helena. The room was empty save for Mark Antony.

Eleven o'clock, twelve, one o'clock came and the "All Clear" signal, and presently footsteps on the stairs. Evey flew to the door and opened it, and Helena came in — slowly, as though infinitely weary, and without looking at them sat down in the blue chair by the fire.

"I'm so tired," she said.

She took off her hat and sat holding it limply over the arm of the chair. They pounced on her, pelting her with questions. What had happened to her: where had she been?

"Richmond."

"When the raid began?"

The hat she was holding dropped on the floor. They left it there.

"Yes. I was walking down the Terrace looking at the river. Then the searchlights came out like white daggers."

"But when the noise began? You didn't stay up there then, looking at the river?"

Helena wrinkled her forehead as though she could not remember.

"People began to run."

"Why didn't you run with them?"

"I don't remember."

"What *did* you do?"

"I went on to the station. People kept running by and shouting out things. Somebody got hold of me and pulled me along. I was too tired. . . . They went on without me."

"And when you got to the station? What then?"

Evey was impatient.

"There weren't any trains. I walked . . . miles, it seemed. At Barnes I found another station. I think it must have been Barnes because there was a common. Ever so long afterwards a train came in. I got out somewhere . . . Clapham Junction,

I think." She wrinkled her forehead again, in this painful effort to remember. "There weren't any 'buses, I suppose. I don't know. I think I walked. . . . I'm so tired. I couldn't be as tired as all this if I hadn't."

Evey said nothing—just sat there at Philip's feet and sobbed, her head on his knee.

"Why does she cry?" Helena asked Phil. "I wish she wouldn't. It makes my head ache."

Evey stopped crying, sat up, blew her nose hard and went into the kitchen. She emerged presently, dry-eyed, and with hot milk which she made Helena drink.

Phil spent that night curled up on the blue divan.

8

The wan January morning was looking in through the window when Evey awoke to find Helena sitting up in bed chanting something in a high shrill voice.

"April again . . . two days to Primrose Day. . . . What does it matter? We shan't see any primroses here. . . . I can see them as they grew down there in Kent, flowing over the roadside like a yellow sea. You trod on them, as you walked. And primroses in a blue frock I know. April ought to be green and gold. And here it's all red. . . ."

And then, all over again from the beginning.

"What does it matter? We shan't see any primroses here. . . ."

Evey tumbled out of bed and sent Phil for a doctor, then went into the kitchen and hunted for lemons. Because Phil looking at Helena had said "Fever, of some sort," and lemons were supposed to be good for fever.

The young slim woman with the earnest eyes who came back with Phil and announced herself as a doctor, said they must have a nurse.

9

Helena faced the world again on a windy day in March, and with reluctance, for bed was a comfortable place where you did not need to make any effort at all. And if you remembered things that were too poignant and terrible you just

turned your face to the wall and people thought you were asleep. But the young woman with the earnest eyes had said that she was well enough to get up. The studio was full of flowers, and Ursula, for whom Evey had sent, had put a little pile of cards and letters on the table for her to look at. Letters from Nelly, from Vivien, Stella, Cissie and Walter; cards from Brian and Barbara, and one, quite plain, on which was scrawled in a hand she knew, "J. R. C." with a few flowers.

Jerome too! Easy to see which were his flowers — a great handful of them, red roses and pink, fragrant and unseasonable, like the peaches on the table that he must also have sent. Ursula had put the roses in Hilary's pewter vase (the one he had bought that morning at Liberty's), and the sight of them there touched some tender fretted string of memory. Helena's mouth quivered. She went over to them, stooped to smell them and saw not the roses at all, but only slender hands she had loved, that turned the vase round and round up there on a 'bus in the windy day. . . .

She buried her face in them — asked no questions.

The days of convalescence passed. Helena regretted each one as it went, because it was pleasant to lie here in the March sunshine and feel that one was expected to do nothing at all, save take slow walks round the Chelsea Squares and read the books Evey brought in from Mudie's and talk to Ursula of little trivial things like the weather and the cripples (even they seemed trivial, somehow, but then most things were; most things, that is, that one could talk of at all). Ursula talked sometimes of Evey, whom she liked. She supposed that Evey, one day, would be marrying that nice Mr. Roscoe who had been here when she came. Helena had not thought of that, but it was true, of course. Evey's world was not empty. There were lots of things for Evey. And for her? Nothing. Nothing at all. Things for her were finished. It was as though she and Hilary had sat through a rapturous prelude, and had had to go out before the main theme developed. Never, now, would she — or he! — know what the finished symphony was like.

Helena grew rapidly better as the days passed, but though her strength revived her soul felt threadbare. She no longer

wanted to fight, because the part of her that had wanted to do that had died. These idle dreaming days were tolerable. Perhaps they would go on for ever.

Presently it was April again — an unbearable month trailing sharp-edged memories. Helena shrank away from it, not wanting to see the swelling buds on the beech and chestnut trees, nor the mists of pale lilac nor the primroses they sold in the streets. But the earnest-eyed woman-doctor insisted that she must go out into the sun, and because it was easier to go than to explain why she wanted to hide, she went.

Yet she realised, none the less, that from now onwards it was always going to be easier to do things than to explain why you would rather not.

So Helena and Ursula continued to walk abroad in the April weather, until presently it was May and Ursula began to talk of going home to Yorkshire.

Quite suddenly then there woke up in Helena a queer longing for the moors and the things that grew on them, the strong winds that blew over them, the peace that was theirs, indigentous like the heather and the bilberry bush. Peace, most of all, was what she wanted. Peace and retreat and healing. Must one go back to Yorkshire to look for them?

Then one day just as tea was ready there was a ring at the front door bell. Ursula went down to answer it and it was some time before her step came on the stair again, and with it another, heavier, more deliberate, and the sound of a masculine voice. Waiting there at the table the colour came into Helena's face. An impulse seized her to turn and flee. Then the door opened and an anxious-faced Ursula said steadily:

“Here is a visitor for you, my dear!”

She stepped on one side, and, limping a little, Jerome came into the room.

CHAPTER EIGHT

1

IT was Helena who spoke first, though she never remembered what it was she said. Neither of them ever remembered much of anything of that meeting. But somehow Jerome took a seat at the table and Ursula gave him some tea: and they talked, quite intelligently, of intelligent things.

Presently they had the room to themselves. How that happened, too, they did not remember. Some shadowy mental picture of Ursula with a basket stayed with them and some excuse (equally shadowy) about a shop that had been forgotten. Anyhow, it was all grotesquely like the beginning of things away there in that old house on the edge of the moor when Jerome used first to come to dinner and people schemed to leave them alone together.

Time passed. A good deal of it. A trivial conversation began, halting and uncertain. Ursula did not come back. The trivial conversation fluttered like a faint breeze before thunder and died down. And still Ursula did not come. It grew darker: the fire sank lower. Shadows danced into the room and with them memories, sharp-edged, like those that came with April. Across the gloom the painted figure of Hilary's "Deirdre" gleamed, shadow-strewn. Away there in the corner, its face covered and turned to the wall, was "Interior." That, now, would never be finished. *Ars longa*. . . . The intolerable memories surged and surged. Helena shivered in the chill May evening. For how should one ever forget? And how could one bear to live if one should not?

"Lena. I came to ask you something. . . . May I?"

Out of the pain and the quiet and the intolerable memories, Jerome's voice. And her own, tremulous with things remembered.

"Of course. . . ."

"I want you to come back."

"To you?"

"To 'Windward.'"

Even in that shadow-girt room he saw the little spasm that passed over her face. Was it wistfulness or distaste? One could not tell in this half-light. And she said nothing. An interval long as eternity before she spoke.

"But I have nothing to give you. Nothing at all. Not one of the things you will want."

"I want nothing that you are not willing to give. I ask nothing. Just come back. On your own terms."

Pity, not wistfulness, sat now in Helena's eyes, and for the first time pity seemed to her something other than the wholly detestable virtue she had always thought it. It appeared, almost, a thing upon which one might erect a new life. *Invisible tides!* Where now were they bearing her? A strange thing, this — that Jerome should be asking her to go back. After all that had happened. But what was stranger still was that she could bear to think of returning. Because she found that she could.

She wanted peace and retreat and healing, and Jerome was offering them to her. For nothing. Nothing at all. One had to remember that: it was important, since one had nothing left to give. But one had to try to think clearly — to get a little deeper. Impossible to do either in this room so full of memories and agonies.

She moved across the room and switched on the light.

"Well?" asked Jerome.

Her face was hidden from him. The big chair shielded her.

"Let me think," she said, "let me think. . . ."

2

A queer situation. The sort of thing you would say did not happen. Helena herself would have said so. But it had. Here in this blue and silver room she had passed happy hours with the one man she had ever loved. And he was dead. In his stead there sat here now the man who — after all that had happened — remained still her husband. She had married him

because you have to buy your own experience and some of us are bad marketers and pay too dearly. She had known from the first (in the way women do know, unmistakably) that she had not loved him: but she had for him respect and a sort of genuine liking — cold substitutes for love, perhaps, but many people have managed admirably on much less. She, too, perhaps, if Hilary had not come to show her what she had missed. . . . With hands too eager, then, and hearts too greedy, they had snatched and taken. Jerome had been left to realize how very cold love's substitutes really are: what tricks they can play you. . . .

But here was the end. Here, too, the man despoiled asking her to go back. On her own terms. Asking nothing. Wanting nothing, save the sight of her, there as of old, in the house she had christened. . . .

She looked across at him sitting back in Hilary's blue arm-chair, and saw that he had changed: that suffering had not visited him without leaving its mark. And he was her victim. She forgot that, in some sense, she too had been his. Because that hadn't mattered. He had not been able to prevent her from being happy. One did great things for love and cruel things. Love was beyond knowledge and reason and little kindly acts. It was stronger than pity, but it could die, or be made of no account. That was how it had been with hers. It had been made of no account. Hilary had passed out beyond its reach, and all that was best in her had passed out after him, though it could never overtake him nor come within hailing distance.

Love and she could have no more to say to each other. Some women might love again, but she would not. All that was over. You could not undo it nor forget it. But it was over — done with.

The things of love were dead. The things of pity lived on.

3

Jerome realised one thing only as he waited for her to speak. That he loved her — after all that had happened! — as much as before, even far more. It was a passion of feeling that would go down with him to the grave. You could not explain

or reason about it. It was a thing as inexorable, as unwavering, as the law of gravity.

He did not find her much altered. A little thinner, perhaps, a little older, certainly; with some new quality about her that had not, in quite that way, belonged to the former Helena, and something that was tenderer and wiser looking out of her eyes. In a dim fugitive fashion Jerome realised that she knew more — understood more than that slim girl he had fallen in love with and married with so much expedition. For those who go down to sorrow bring back understanding with them. . . .

4

The things of pity lived on. . . .

Jerome wanted her. Had always wanted her: so that her going back would make him happy. She scarcely looked for happiness for herself. One does not, in an empty world. It takes you a long time to fill up a world.

Decision stirred within her. Jerome needed her, and his need stood suddenly as a bulwark between her and the intolerable emptiness of things. No one else wanted her as Jerome wanted her — not even Evey whose life would soon be full of those beautiful things Helena had had and was now done with for ever. Not that you could have had them for nothing. Deep down within her was stored their sweetness and fragrance. Later one might dig and come to them. Only not now. One had no energy for digging to-day — nor any mind for it.

Meantime, there was Jerome. Jerome had shifted back again into her life. She saw him suddenly as a permanent figure, and knew that she had it in her power to make him happy. Here, now, at the last, she owed him that. It was a debt she could pay. And though she might not have happiness she would certainly have peace. That, at the moment, was the only thing that mattered — that she might have peace.

“Well?” said Jerome again.

Her slow crooked smile made his heart leap.

“If you’ll have me . . . empty-handed,” she said, “I’ll come.”

5

Later, Evey had to be told. . . .

And at the end of a lot of other things she said,

“Oh, Lena, it seems like the end of everything. . . .”

“But the end,” Helena objected, “is so much like the beginning, you see. . . .”

Evey wept.

6

Ursula was wiser than Evey. She knew that life did not come to an end just because the thing you treasured most had dropped out. Life went on. You had to do the best you could for yourself with the things that remained. For Helena there remained Jerome. Ursula liked Jerome and honoured him. He was possessive: he clutched still with both hands at the traditions modernity was tearing from him. But he loved Helena. And Ursula, being wise, knew that you look at your possessions very differently when once you have realised that they are capable of getting up and walking away from you. Moreover, she was optimistic enough to believe that the world must hold some place for two people who honestly desired to make each other happy. . . .

So Ursula did not weep.

7

Two days later Jerome and a car awaited Helena at the door. A car as new and unfamiliar as the scene to which it was bearing her. She stepped in, hugging Mark Antony tight in her arms. Jerome tucked the rug round her feet, and Evey and Ursula called good-byes from the open door.

The London streets took some shaking off: there were so many of them. But presently the open road gleamed ahead and Helena lay back and closed her eyes. If her heart ached she was not aware of it. She was aware this morning of nothing at all save, as of old, that Jerome drove well, and that away there in the hills peace waited.

THE END

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